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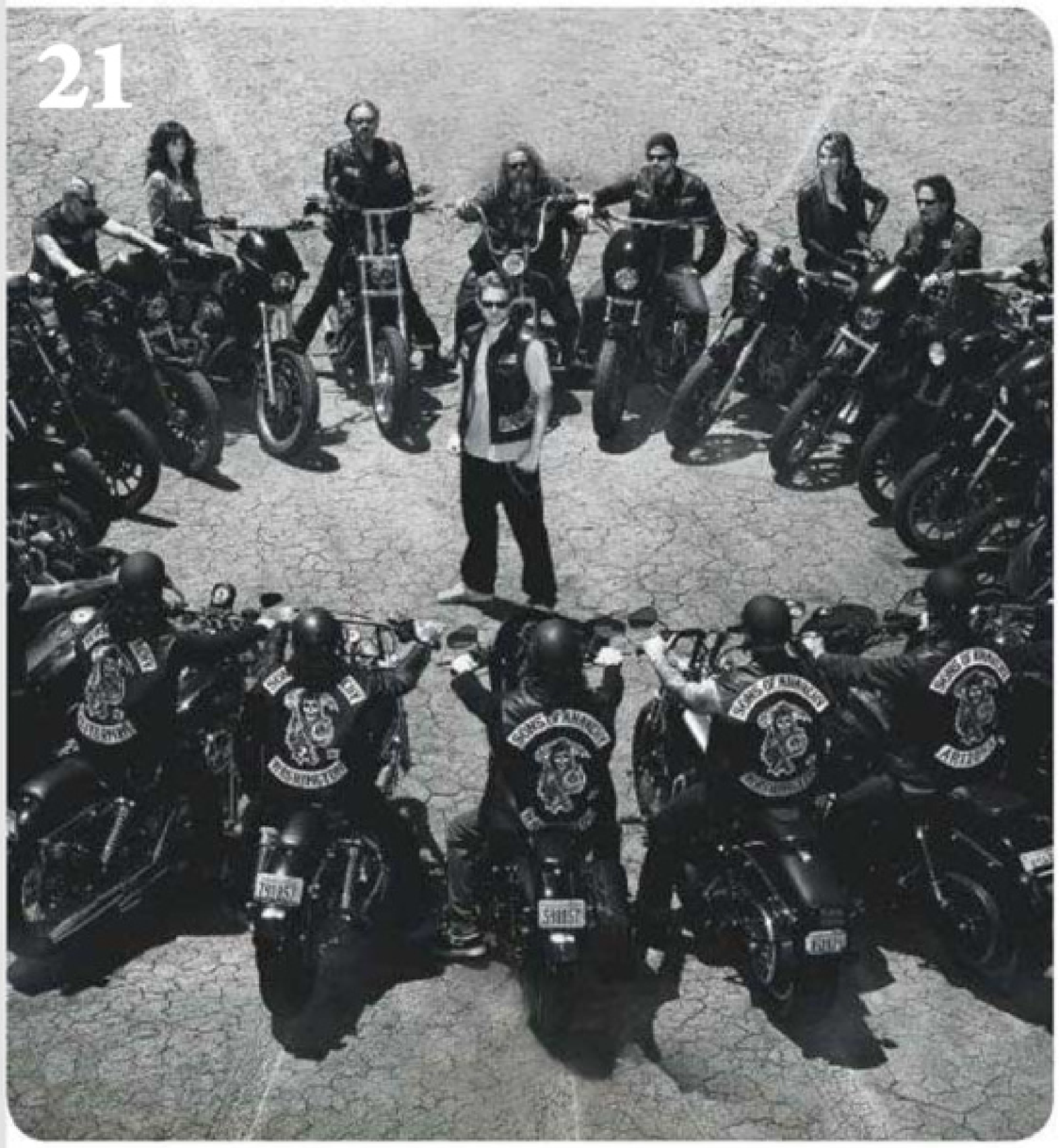
Home cinema has had more 'wars' than I care to remember: VHS vs Betamax, Blu-ray vs HD DVD, Dolby Digital vs DTS, to name three. Yet the battle that's had technophiles arguing for years concerns TV display technology – LCD vs plasma. The former easily leads the way in terms of sales, but the latter remains a soft spot for home cinema enthusiasts, helped by its ability to go darker and look, well, more cinematic.

Now, though, it seems plasma is reaching its endgame, with Panasonic recently announcing that the forthcoming ZT65 represents its last slice of panel R&D. More screens will come next year, but, apparently, they won't be an improvement. What better time, then, for Samsung to launch easily its best plasma display yet, the PS64F8500. Our cover star is simply brilliant – so if we are witnessing the final chapter of plasma, it's certainly bowing out in style...

Mark Craven
Editor



MENU









Contributors



John Archer: The UK's most experienced TV tester cut his teeth as an early *HCC* staffer



Richard Stevenson: Industry veteran and former Editor of UK CE trade journal *ERT*



Steve May: *HCC*'s former Editor-in-Chief is one of the UK's most respected AV journos



Martin Pipe Technical expert Martin is renown throughout the home cinema industry



Adam Rayner: The UK's foremost expert in extreme audio writes about bass, hi-fi and, er, cartoons



Adrian Justins: Made his name as the editor of *What Video & TV* and *What Home Cinema*

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BULLETIN

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Audio egg-cellence

KEF E305 Home Theatre Speaker System → www.kef.com



KEF continues to refine its distinctive 'egg' speaker design with this latest 5.1 sub/sat array. The E305's ovoid satellites boast a brand-new version of KEF's Uni-Q driver derived from technology used in the award-winning Q300. Improvements in the E305's 4.5in Uni-Q driver array include the use of a vented tweeter, as well as mounting the midrange driver in a Z-flex surround for a smoother 'waveguide surface'. The E305 5.1 system retails for £900 in a choice of black or white finishes. Additional pairs of satellites can be purchased to build a 7.1 setup.

HCC ONLINE...

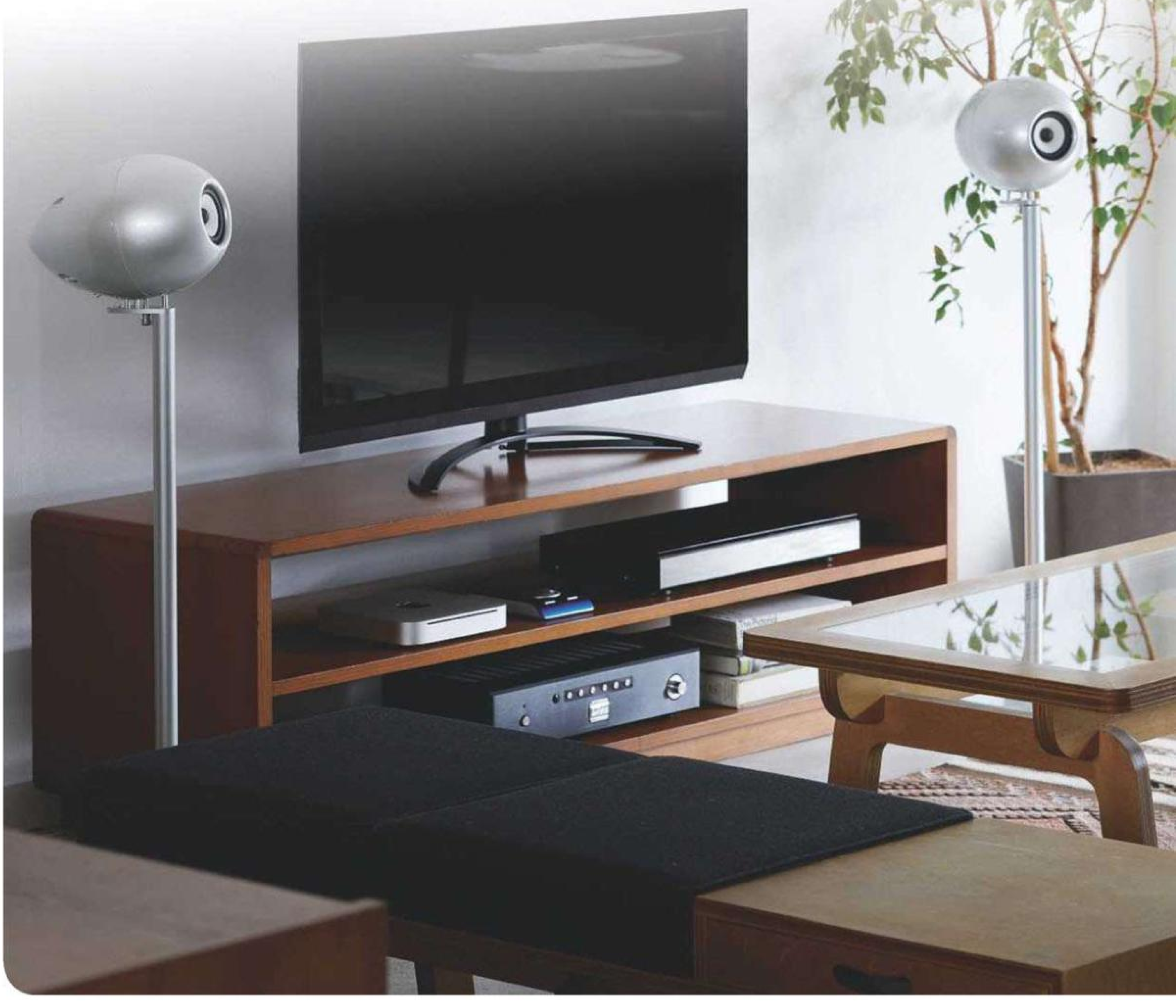
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Time to upgrade?

Eclipse Series 5 MK2/3 upgrades → www.eclipse-td.net

If you can't hide the loudspeakers in your home cinema, then at least make sure they look and sound fantastic. That's the message accompanying the latest versions of Eclipse of Japan's Series 5 Time Domain speaker lineup. The TD307MK2A (£180 each), TD508MK3 (£480 each, pictured) and TD510MK2 (£960 each) can be shelf-, stand-, wall- or ceiling-mounted without, says the brand, any effect on performance. Technological improvements across the trio include new drivers, larger cabinets, heavier mass anchors, larger ports and additional magnetic shielding.



In-wall loudspeaker



High-end AV specialist Meridian Audio has announced that its new DSP520 Digital Active In-wall Loudspeaker is now available to order in the UK. Priced at around £2,500 each, the DSP520 can be mounted either horizontally or vertically and has been designed to both complement Meridian's other in-wall models or be paired with its freestanding loudspeakers. Key features include a narrow 200mm design, Wide Range Driver technology and Advanced DSP with Enhanced Bass Alignment tech.
www.meridian-audio.com

Waterproof TV duo



Waterproof TV pioneer Aquavision has added a pair of surface-mounted televisions to its line-up. The HD LED 19in will set you back around £1,750, while the FHD 26in model retails for around £2,550. Unlike previous waterproof TVs, the company claims that these can be easily retrofitted into an existing room because they can be mounted directly onto walls and don't require a cavity to be made in the wall for installation. Both models are available in a choice of three finishes – Black, Polar White or MirrorVision.
www.aquavision.tv

Acer powers up PJs



Acer has introduced a quartet of home cinema projectors to its H Series line-up. The H9501BD (£1,900), H7532BD (£870) and H6510BD (£830) are all 1080p models, while the H5370BD (£580) opts for 720p resolution. Acer claims that contrast ratios run from 50,000:1 in the H9501BD down to a more modest 13,000:1 in the H5360BD. All four projectors are 3D compatible (with on-board 2D-to-3D conversion), feature dual HDMI inputs and support MHL connectivity with mobile devices.
www.acer.co.uk

Harmony takes on the tablets

The universal remote brand unveils Ultimate 'swipe and tap' controller

At the tail-end of January Logitech CEO Bracken P. Darrell revealed that the company was planning to sell off its Harmony remote control business in an effort to turn around 'disappointing' fiscal results. But the fact that Harmony currently faces an uncertain future doesn't mean that it is going to stop innovating any time soon – a fact ably demonstrated when it invited *HCC* along to preview a new universal remote that embraces the smartphone and tablet ecosphere.



Marc Chaplin: 'Smartphones and tablets have changed people's habits, but our new devices offer more than existing apps'



The £230 Harmony Ultimate uses a separate network-connected hub, cleverly called the Harmony Hub, to provide alternative iOS and Android control. The hub reacts to commands from the handset to emit IR signals that control up to 15 devices; operated via the app the number of devices drops to eight.

A newly designed version of the Harmony Touch remote, the Ultimate offers swipe and tap control using onscreen icons. It also features improved ergonomics and haptic feedback, whereby the remote vibrates to confirm operations are executed. The RF-operated hub can be placed in a cabinet where it emits its signals in all directions – with sockets to hookup two IR blasters for reaching external kit. It also offers Bluetooth control of the PS3 and Wii consoles (the Xbox 360 uses IR).

Standalone Hub

The company also revealed its £110 Harmony Smart Control, which consists solely of a Harmony Hub that can be operated by the iOS or Android app. For times when the phone or tablet is being used elsewhere, a basic handset is also provided.

During the Summer the Harmony Hub will be made available as a standalone device to provide an upgrade path for existing Harmony Touch users. The apps are free to download but require a Harmony Hub to work. As Marc Chaplin, Harmony's Digital Home Sales Manager, told *HCC*: 'Smartphones and tablets have changed people's habits but our new devices offer much more than existing apps.' Still nurturing Harmony's database of over 225,000 home cinema components, the new hub eliminates the need to set up the universal remote using a physical connection to a computer.

Some countries' EPGs are app-integrated but not Freeview or Freesat. Chaplin does, however, enthuse about the automatic onscreen population of channel icons according to which TV service provider is chosen, and integration with Philips Hue lighting control, 'You can now press one button and this remote will turn on your setup, set the light levels and play a disc at your preferred volume.'

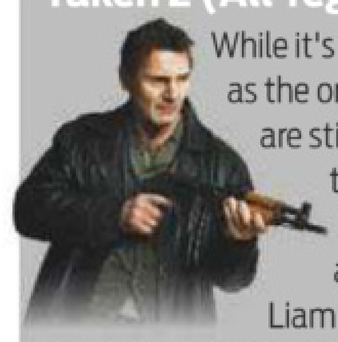


Harmony's new Ultimate and Smart Control handsets

Playlist...

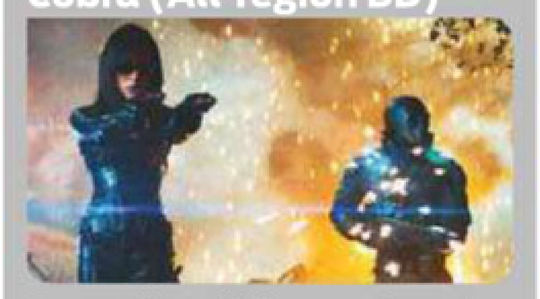
Team *HCC* spins up its disc picks of the month

Taken 2 (All-region BD)



While it's not as good as the original, there are still very few things as satisfying as watching Liam Neeson kill people in HD. Now, how about that *Taken Vs. Transporter* film we've been dreaming about?

G.I. Joe: The Rise of Cobra (All-region BD)



Re-watching this hyperactive action flick in preparation for the sequel reminded us how much fun it is...

Partrimilgrimage: The Specials (R2 DVD)



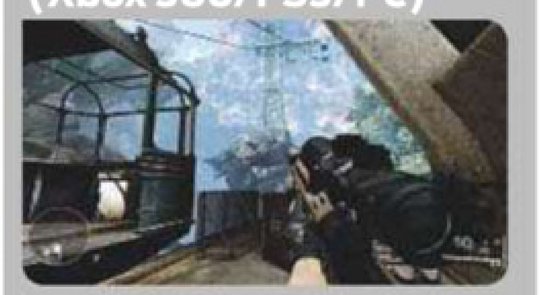
This collection of the recent Alan Partridge Sky outings is keeping us going until August's feature film

Scream 4 (Region B BD)



This horror-comedy sequel is easily superior to *Scream 3*. And, whisper it, possibly better than *Scream 2*

Sniper: Ghost Warrior 2 (Xbox 360/PS3/PC)

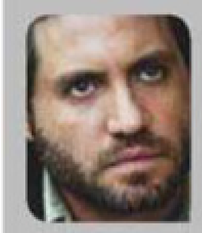


Realistic mechanics and genuinely challenging gameplay make this stealth-based console shooter worth a shot

LOADING...

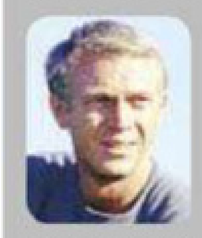
Team *HCC*'s pick of the hottest BD and DVD news

From *Zero* to HD hero



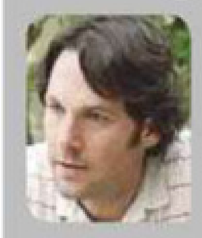
Universal Pictures has confirmed that *Zero Dark Thirty* – Kathryn Bigelow's acclaimed and controversial film about the mission to kill Osama bin Laden – will be hitting DVD and Blu-ray in the UK on June 13. While the DVD looks set to be a barebones disc, the hi-def platter promises a quartet of behind-the-scenes featurettes as well as an UltraViolet Digital Copy of the film.

Classic action adventure breaks out on Blu-ray



20th Century Fox will release the classic Steve McQueen movie *The Great Escape* on Blu-ray just in time for Father's Day. Arriving on June 3, the disc promises more than three hours of extras and is sourced from an all-new 4K remaster of the film.

The king of comedy



This is 40, the latest flick from joke-juggernaut Judd Apatow, is getting a Summer home media release. Described as a 'sort-of-sequel to *Knocked Up*', the comedy smash will land on DVD and BD in the UK on June 24, with the latter promising plenty of exclusive extras.



Yamaha revamps AVR range

Six-strong affordable RX-V series to include new DAB radio model

Home cinema stalwart Yamaha has announced its entry-level 2013 AVR series, and introduced a DAB model to its stable for the first time.

The new RX-V lineup features six models, beginning at just £250. Some models are on sale now; others will surface in June.

The most potent of the new range is the £650 RX-V775. A 7.1-channel design, this claims a power output of 160W-per-channel (into 6ohms, one channel driven) and offers six HDMI inputs and twin HDMI outputs. Napster and Airplay support is built-in; other features include 4K passthrough and upscaling, iPod, iPad and iPhone hookup via USB, and DLNA networking. Below this sit the RX-V675 (£500), RX-V575 (£450), RX-V475 (£350) and the RX-V375 (£250). The latter model is a budget 5.1-channel affair, offering just four HDMI inputs and eschewing all home networking functionality.

The new DAB radio model is a change of tack for the brand. Dubbed the RX-V500D, this will retail for £400 yet is more in line with the RX-V475 in terms of grunt and specifications. Up to 40 presets from its DAB tuner can be saved, selectable from either the supplied handset or the free Yamaha AVR app for both Android and iOS.

Audio gurus: The brand's commitment to DSPs continues in its 2013 range

Dizzy with DSP

A key part of Yamaha's ethos is its devotion to DSPs, and this is retained in 2013, with 17 separate modes offered on even the most basic model. 'Yamaha was the pioneer in surround sound technology and the first to take the aspect of surround processing to the next level,' says the brand.

All of the new models except the entry-level RX-V375 are Bluetooth and Wi-Fi compatible. However, accessing these technologies requires the separate purchase of additional adaptors, whereas Yamaha's biggest rival in the affordable AVR market, Onkyo, has this year incorporated both Wi-Fi and Bluetooth into its TX-NR525, TX-NR626 and TX-NR726 models.

As for the brands' new high-end hardware, this will surface end of May. So you'll have to be patient...

Shine on you crazy Black Diamond

Ambient light rejecting material now available on 'sleek and sexy' motorised screen

US projector screen manufacturer Screen Innovations has released a motorised version of its highly impressive Black Diamond projector screen, claiming with gusto that it now gives cinema fans 'the world's first levitating TV that "floats" an image in thin air and virtually disappears into the environment's existing décor.'

Distributed in the UK by Anthem AV Solutions, the Black Diamond Motorised screen boasts industry-leading ambient light rejection technology that reduces measured light scatter by over 75 per cent.

'With an image quality that rivals plasma TVs, [the Black Diamond Motorised screen] is the most interior design-friendly entertainment solution available', says Anthem AV Solutions' Technical Sales Manager Tom Garrett. 'Now customers can enjoy a bigscreen picture in their main entertainment room when they want it, and make it completely disappear when they don't.'

The screens are built to order in the US, with a typical delivery time of six-to-eight weeks. Prices start at around £6,500 for a 92in diagonal 16:9 aspect ratio screen.



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Diary

Our calendar ensures that you don't miss out...

→ MAY

04: Grand Designs Live
London's ExCeL plays host to this epic nine-day expo based on the popular Channel 4 series. Boasting more that 500 exhibitors, the event is split into seven different areas including self-build, renovations and – you guessed it – technology!
www.granddesignslive.com

09: Star Trek Into Darkness

Kirk and Spock will be bringing their epic space bro-mance to cinemas across the UK from today. But before they can get too chummy, they're going to have to deal with interstellar terrorist Benedict Cumberbatch.
www.paramountpictures.co.uk

13: The Long Riders
Walter Hill's sublime 1980 take on the Jesse James legend gets a long overdue UK Blu-ray release courtesy of Second Sight. Extras will include interviews with Hill and actors Stacey Keach and Robert Carradine.
www.secondsightfilms.co.uk

16: The Great Gatsby 3D
Baz Luhrmann brings his usual eye-popping aesthetic sensibilities to the world of 3D with this new adaptation of F. Scott Fitzgerald's classic novel. Catch Leonardo DiCaprio and Carey Mulligan vamping it up in 3D at a cinema near you from today.
www.warnerbros.co.uk

20: Connections 2013
The Venetian in Las Vegas is ready to open its doors to the 17th annual Connections trade conference. Across four days of keynote addresses and consumer research, the event intends to cover all of the latest innovations and developments aimed at the 'connected consumer'.
www.connectionsus.com

23: Fast & Furious 6

Vin Diesel and Paul Walker join forces with The Rock once again to show that there are still plenty of crime sprees that can be cut short through the use of fast cars. Make tracks to your local multiplex to catch it.
www.universalpictures.co.uk

30: HCC #222
The next issue of your favourite home cinema magazine hits the stands today, packed with hardware tests, features, outspoken opinion and in-depth software reviews.
www.homecinemachoice.com

Sony lowers the cost of 4K

55in Ultra HD screen to hit US stores with $4,999 price tag

Sony has finally announced US pricing of its forthcoming Ultra HD TVs, with figures lower than many may have predicted.

The announcement, made during the recent professional digital media expo NAB 2013 in Las Vegas, confirms that its 55in XBR-55X900A and 65in XBR-65X900A screens (which were first unveiled at this year's CES show) will sell for $4,999 and $6,999 respectively.

'These new models will be arriving in homes just before the Summer and are sure to bring the enhanced viewing experience of 4K TV to a whole new audience,' said Sony Electronics Home Division senior VP Mike Lucas.

'Our TVs deliver a vibrant and natural picture that is four-times clearer than high-definition,' added Lucas for the benefit of anyone still unsure what the big deal was.



Out in front: With its new screens and dedicated media player, Sony is leading the 4K charge

Plummeting price point

Considering the brand's first-gen 84in Ultra HD screen launched with a price tag of more than $20,000, this new wave of screens is showing heavy price erosion, even taking into account the smaller screen size. It still remains to be seen what the equivalent UK models will retail for (and we should know by the next issue of *HCC*) but it certainly looks as if consumer fears that Ultra HD would remain a luxury technology for some time are unfounded. And there's certainly a concerted industry drive towards the new video standard, including a working group of the Blu-ray Disc Association targeted with ushering in a new UHD disc format.

While that remains a way off, Sony is also selling a UHD media player to its Stateside customers, and used NAB 2013 to firm up some of the details. The circular-designed FMP-X1 will come bundled with 10 movies (including the likes of *Total Recall* (2012) and *The Bridge on the River Kwai*) and cost $699. This will go on sale in the Summer; towards the end of the year, a fee-based 'video distribution service' will enable owners to gather more UHD content from Sony Pictures and 'other notable production houses'. Unfortunately for early adopters, the media player still remains unconfirmed for the UK.



Sony's new UHD screens show the cost of the technology is dropping

LG adds Spotify



LG has added the Spotify music streaming service to its 2013 range of smart media devices. The service requires a premium subscription and launched on a variety of Blu-ray players and cinema packages, including the flagship 9.1-channel LG BH9530TW cinema system. 'Spotify wants to be at the heart of the home entertainment experience, so it's a natural fit to make our music service available on Blu-ray players and home cinema systems,' says LG.
www.lg.com/uk

Give your TV a boost



The debut soundbar from US audio company Speakercraft is now available to buy in the UK. Distributed here by Aldous Systems, the CS3 TV Speaker will set you back around £600 and features two 1in silk dome tweeters, a quartet of 3in treated paper cone mid-range drivers and two downward-firing woofers. Unusually, the CS3 opts for a pedestal design allowing it to be used as a TV stand (the company claims it can support screen sizes up to 60in) rather than a traditional wall-hanging 'bar' enclosure.
www.aldoussystems.co.uk

Dolby 3D agreement



Dolby has entered into an agreement with Philips and James Cameron's CPG (Cameron-Pace Group) to collaborate on the development of autostereoscopic 3D using the Dolby 3D technology. 'The Dolby 3D format gives filmmakers the means to bring an artistic vision through production and distribution all the way to presentation, while delivering what we believe to be the best possible 3D experience to the consumer – without the need for special glasses,' stated CPG co-chairman Vince Pace.
www.dolby.com

This month's top 10 news stories in handy, bite-sized chunks...



News x10

1 Pirates got Game (of Thrones)

The Season Three premiere of HBO's fantasy blockbuster *Game of Thrones* has set a new record for piracy. Research from BitTorrent tracker TorrentFreak shows that the episode was downloaded more than a million times in the 24 hours after it was first broadcast in the US. The site also reported that more than 163,000 people were sharing a copy of the episode in the same 24-hour period – the largest number of people sharing a BitTorrent copy ever and the most since the premiere of *Heroes* (which hit 144,000 copies).

2 2012 TV sales

Samsung saw its share of the global TV market increase to 27.7 per cent last year – more than that of Japanese brands Panasonic, Sony and Sharp combined.

3 The cost of illegal downloads

More piracy: Hollywood studios lost nearly $2billion in revenue from potential disc sales for 2012's ten most pirated movies. Video software company Ooyala estimates that there were more than 75 million downloads for the ten films, with Warner Home Video's *Project X* out in front with a whopping 8.72 million.

4 Sharp searches for interns

Sharp Europe is running a competition to give two students the opportunity to win a paid internship at its Research and Design centre in Oxford. To enter, students simply need to sketch an interesting solution to an every day problem, take a photo of the sketch and share it on Twitter with the hashtag #GetItDownOnPaper by May 27, 2013. For more information, including full terms and conditions, visit www.humansinvent.com.

5 Disney closes LucasArts

Legendary games studio LucasArts has been closed by Disney, stating that it will be shifting 'from internal development to a licensing model, minimizing the company's risk while achieving a broader portfolio of *Star Wars* games.' The fate of LucasArts' highly-anticipated *Star Wars 1313* game has yet to be revealed.

6 Samsung raided by police

South Korean police visited the offices of Samsung Electronics Co. as part of an ongoing investigation into claims that people connected to LG had leaked secret data to the rival company. Naturally, Samsung immediately went on the defensive, with company spokeswoman Jun Eun Sun stating, 'We have no reason to steal other companies' technology, as we have the world's best OLED technology.'

7 Hilco rescues HMV

Another month, another story about HMV. But for once, it's good news! Restructuring specialist Hilco has come to the rescue of the troubled high street retailer with a deal that could save as many as 2,500 jobs. The company (which already owns HMV Canada) acquired 132 branches of HMV – plus the nine branches of Fopp – in a deal worth around £50 million.

8 DTS adapts

DTS has unveiled a new audio solution that allows media services to offer adaptive bit-rate audio streaming from a single encode. DTS Layered Audio tech eliminates the need for multiple encodes of the same audio tracks and reduces digital storage costs.

9 Control4 goes roaming

Control4 has enhanced its 4Sight Service with the release of Control4 OS 2.4. The new update enables 3G/4G connectivity to a Control4 home automation system via an iOS or Android mobile device from 'virtually anywhere' in the world. OS 2.4 also delivers native support for TuneIn on the HC-800 and HC-250 controllers, adding over 70,000 internet radio stations.

10 PMC retires speakers

PMC is retiring its two-way iSeries speakers due to the success of its Twenty Series lineup. The company claims that sales of the five-strong speaker line-up have been so strong that it has discontinued production of four iSeries models (DB1i, GB1i, TB2i and FB1i) in order to refocus and reallocate capacity at its production facilities to the newer cabinets.



Premiere

What's happening in the world of TV and films...

Less fast, more furious

The Rock has teased fans that his *Fast & Furious* character Luke Hobbs may be in line for his own spin-off vehicle (excuse the pun). 'I know that's the goal,' admitted the action star in a recent interview.

Tom's your U.N.C.L.E.



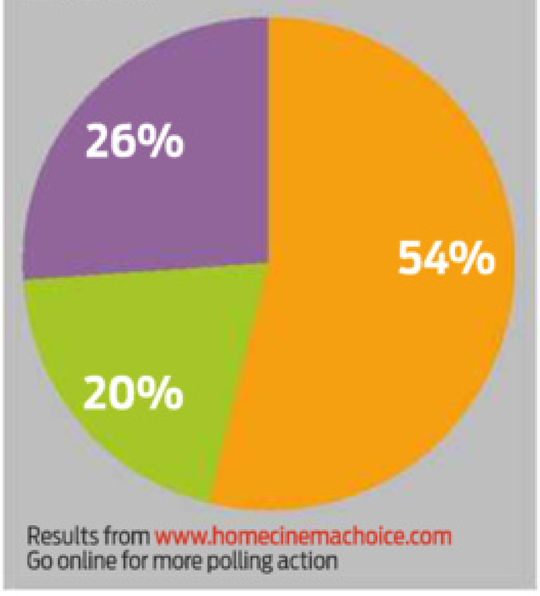
Not content with having one movie franchise under his belt based on an old TV show, Tom Cruise is reported to be in talks to join Guy Ritchie's upcoming bigscreen adaptation of *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* The project has been in development for a number of years now and was once set to star George Clooney and be directed by Steven Soderbergh.

JP4 finds a director

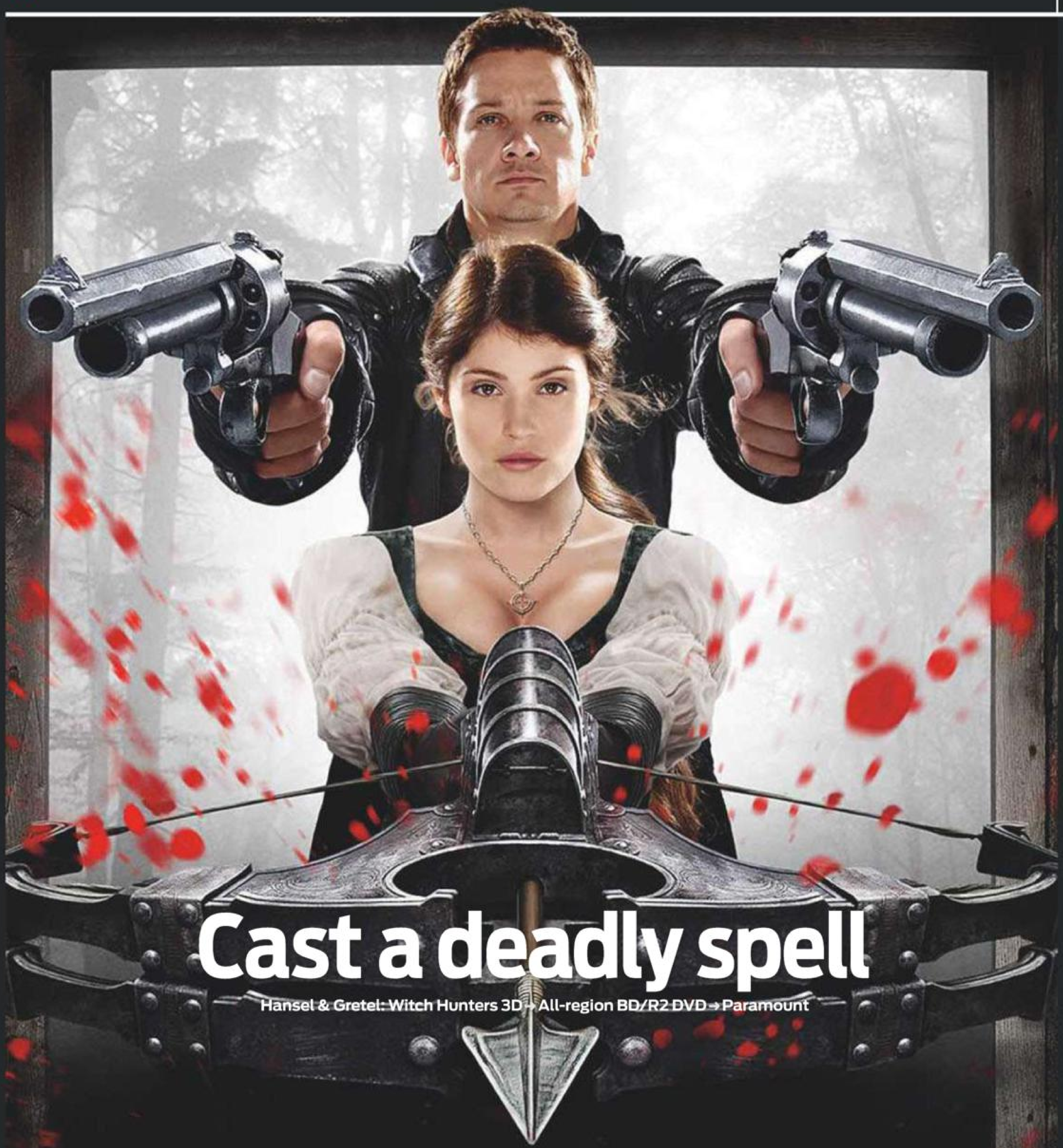
Universal has announced that it has signed Justin Trevorrow to direct the long-awaited *Jurassic Park 4*. While Trevorrow has only directed one other feature film (the indie time-travel comedy *Safety Not Guaranteed*), the studio feels he is a 'good match for the material'.

We asked...

Which next-generation console are you more likely to buy?



Results from www.homecinemachoice.com
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Cast a deadly spell

Hansel & Gretel: Witch Hunters 3D → All-region BD/R2 DVD → Paramount

Get ready for an action-packed take on the fairy tale when *Hansel & Gretel: Witch Hunters* hits BD, 3D BD and DVD in the UK on June 24. Co-written and directed by Tommy '*Dead Snow*' Wirkola, this fantasy-horror hybrid stars Jeremy Renner and Gemma Arterton as the titular siblings, now professional witch hunters after their childhood troubles. In addition to a trio of featurettes (*Reinventing Hansel & Gretel*, *The Witching Hours* and *Meet Edward the Troll*), the Blu-ray releases also boast an 'uncut' version of the film that Wirkola describes as 'much more extreme'!

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Toshiba preps Ultra HD TV line

Toshiba promises that its debut Ultra HD TVs will be the most competitive 4K models yet. **Steve May** is already counting his pennies



CEVO aficionado: Toshiba's senior product manager Glenn Zanoni

TOSHIBA IS THE latest major TV manufacturer to unveil a line of 4K Ultra HD TVs. Expected to begin shipping in July, the new models are suitably huge (there's a choice of 84in, 65in and 58in screen sizes) and feature the brand's highly-regarded CEVO upscaling picture technology, now dedicated to up-rezzing Full HD content into 4K. At the brand's spring tradeshow, *HCC* had a chance to take a closer look at these portentous new panels and grill the team behind them.

While close inspection of the sets confirmed that they were very much preproduction samples (the smaller models relied upon bolted on-electronics and had yet to be blessed with anything beyond rudimentary connectivity), the range certainly looked enticing. In terms of design, all feature fashionable curved edges and distinctive combination matt-and-gloss finishes, plus downward-firing stereo speakers with an integrated subwoofer. They are, naturally, internet-enabled and 3D compatible. Wi-Fi is built in.

Interestingly, while both the 65in and 84in TVs offer Passive 3D, the 58in requires Active Shutter glasses to deliver stereoscopic thrills, indicating a different panel supplier. Toshiba's senior product manager Glenn Zanoni wouldn't be drawn on what came from where, but made the poetic point: 'While we don't provide the canvas, we paint the picture...'

While the obvious showstopper in the range is the 84in behemoth, it's likely that its 58in sibling will garner the most attention; as a screen size it's a good deal easier to accommodate, after all. And while the brand wouldn't be drawn on prices for any of the models, Toshiba did insist that the trio will be

> 'Having been redefined for the Ultra HD era, Toshiba's CEVO engine upscaler is being touted as a trump card'

'extremely competitive' when they arrive this Summer. We optimistically take that as meaning that the 58L9363 is destined to become the UK's cheapest Ultra HD TV.

The new L7 sets make up the brand's flagship Full HD range



It's CEVO time

Toshiba doesn't just believe it can beat its Ultra HD rivals on price alone. The brand's proprietary CEVO Engine upscaler is being touted as a trump card, having been redefined for the 4K era. 'Obviously there's a lot of development happening on the native 4K content front, and we're working with all the major content providers and broadcasters so that we're closely in line with what they have planned,' Zanoni told us, 'but right now it's all about maximizing the available content out there, and that's where CEVO Engine is focused. It's about delivering the maximum resolution, whether that's from Blu-ray or HD broadcasting.'

Tech details are thin on the ground, but Toshiba confirmed that the processor not only subjectively increases fine detail but also expands the colour gamut of Full HD material. The brand also said that it's 'working with a consultancy to maximise the performance of the processor. We want users to get the most out of existing content.'



Toshiba's Ultra HD lineup includes 58in, 65in (pictured) and 84in models

Of course there's a law of diminishing returns when it comes to 4K on smaller screens, but Zanoni is confident that the smallest set will offer tangible benefits over Full HD. He cites the brand's first foray into 4K, the glasses-free 3D 55in ZL2, as evidence. 'There was never any doubt about the upscaling benefits that the ZL2 offered,' he states.

Those interested in stepping up to the UHD big league should be aware that availability is likely to be initially quite restricted, particularly with the largest screen. 'Obviously when it comes to the 84in model you can't fit it into every shop front in the country,' said Zanoni.

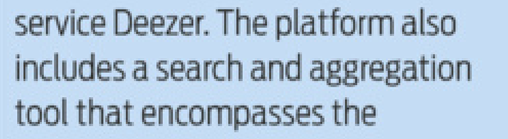
Toshiba's Spring product showcase wasn't just Ultra HD fixated. The brand also took the wraps off its new 6 and 7 Series Full HD TVs and somewhat cheaper L & W 4 Series HD Ready/Full HD screens. All have Wi-Fi built in, which grants them access to the brand's Cloud TV portal (see right), and prices are predictably keen. The 50in 4L model will retail for £700, while the step-up 7L Series will be priced at £900. Indeed, the most expensive regular Full HD set in Toshiba's stable, the 58in L7365DB, will hit the market with a £1,200 price tag, effectively leaving the high-end LED market to its rivals.

Toshiba is also stepping up cross-platform interactivity, with all the aforementioned screens able to stream or mirror the content of a PC equipped with Wi-Di. The televisions are expected to arrive shortly.

Joining the new screens are three fresh-faced Blu-ray players. The BDX5400KB, BDX3400KB and BDX2400KB mirror the cosmetics of this year's panels and offer a limited number of IPTV services (rather than the full Cloud TV UI), including YouTube, Netflix, BBC iPlayer, Acetrax and Picasa. The entry-level BDX2400KB is Wi-Fi ready, while the BDX3400KB and BDX5400KB have Wi-Fi built-in. The range-topper adds 3D support. The trio will be priced at £80, £90 and £100 respectively ■

Up in the cloud...

Toshiba TV owners are no longer going Places



Toshiba has called time on its online portal Toshiba Places, and will debut a new Cloud TV interface on all its 2013 internet-enabled TVs. The promise this time is 'a more personalised and interactive approach to TV viewing,' and at first glance it at least seems to be more intuitive to use than its predecessor. Cloud TV mixes free and on-demand IPTV services with social media clients. Early iterations were displaying BBC iPlayer, Acetrax Movies, YouTube, Netflix, Vimeo and Blinkbox, as well as music service Deezer. The platform also includes a search and aggregation tool that encompasses the programme guide, video-on-demand services and (apparently) content stored on devices connected to a home network. The sets also sport a recommendation engine based on viewing history. To fine-tune this there's an option to create individual user accounts, so that your evening recommendations can't be skewed by the day your children spent watching Nickelodeon...



The BDX5400KB Blu-ray deck – 3D, Wi-Fi and only £100

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TELEVISION'S BEST-KEPT SECRETS

You watched all of *Battlestar Galactica*, are midway through the third season of *Game of Thrones* and can recite *Doctor Who* line for line – but there are plenty of other great TV shows you may be missing out on. ***Team HCC*** rounds up a dozen must-own TV boxsets.

stereojs.com

Breaking Bad on BD?

Your prayers have finally been answered!

It was only recently that *HCC*'s Anton van Beek used his regular column to moan about the lack of UK Blu-ray releases for this superb US series – the good news is that all seasons from one to five are receiving a Blu-ray release on these shores on June 3, to coincide with the fifth season's disc debut.

The show has, of course, been available in the US on Blu-ray for some time, and British fans have even taken to importing Region B releases from Germany, complete with their German language covers. It seems as if Sony Pictures has at last taken pity – maybe after seeing how well the show has been doing over on Netflix...





From deadly doctors to a ghoulish gimp suits – *American Horror Story* has it all

American Horror Story

While the supernatural has proved fertile ground for TV writers, we can count the number of genuinely scary shows on one hand. So who would have guessed that the team behind the happy-clappy TV sensation *Glee* would come up with the creepiest, kinkiest and downright scariest haunted house story in decades? To keep things fresh and frightening, each season of the series is self-contained; the recent second season was set in a mental asylum, the upcoming third promises wicked witches...

Watch this if you like: *The Shining*, *Twin Peaks*, scaring yourself silly
Buy it: *American Horror Story: Season 1* Blu-ray, £40 approx



Archer

Looking for a show that delivers lashings of globe-trotting action and international intrigue? Not only does this hilarious animated spy spoof do all of the above, it's also more stylish than *Mad Men*, parodies the world of office politics more accurately than anything Ricky Gervais ever cooked up and still finds the time to throw out references to obscure Herman Melville short stories. Trust us: *Archer* is not only the funniest show you aren't watching, it's also one of the smartest.

Watch this if you like: The James Bond films, *The Office*, *Mad Men*
Buy it: *Archer: Season 1* DVD, £20 approx, *Archer: Season 2* Blu-ray, £25 approx

Several of *Archer*'s voice actors previously starred in Fox's cult sitcom *Arrested Development*



Braquo

If you thought that *The Shield*'s Vic Mackey had cornered the world of TV cops that blur the line between upholding the law and breaking it, then you've never seen this French crime series. Across the course of two seasons, *Braquo* follows a tight-knit quartet of Parisian cops who will use whatever means necessary to get the job done – whether it's clearing a former boss accused of corruption or simply trying to find redemption amidst the chaos of a gang war. Bold, brutal and bleedin' brilliant.

Watch this if you like: *The Sweeney*, *Spiral*, French swear words
Buy it: *Braquo: Seasons 1 & 2* Blu-ray boxset, £40 approx

FRINGE

TV sci-fi isn't supposed to be smart. It's simply supposed to give fan-pleasing spectacle, like space ships and robots and sexy green slave girls. *Fringe* bucks this trend completely.

Initially this J.J. Abrams-produced series appeared to be little more than a 'mystery of the week' *X-Files* wannabe. But, by the start of its second season, *Fringe* had developed a complex mythology about parallel universes that demanded viewers tune in to every single episode or risk missing something vitally important to understanding everything that followed. Subsequently, *Fringe* didn't exactly fare well in the ratings. But it was so good that Fox could never bring itself to cancel the show, instead letting it complete its story arc across five seasons – the last of which hits DVD and BD in the UK this month. So what are you waiting for?

Watch this if you like: *The X-Files*, *Lost*, string theory
Buy it: *Fringe: The Complete Series* Blu-ray boxset, £100 approx

JUSTIFIED

The prolific American novelist Elmore Leonard has had much of his output reworked for the bigscreen, including *Rum Punch* (aka *Jackie Brown*), *3:10 to Yuma*, *Out of Sight* and *Get Shorty*. The US show *Justified* sees Leonard's Kentucky lawman Rayland Givens (from the novels *Pronto* and *Riding the Rap*) brought to life on the smallscreen, and the result is addictive, absorbing television.

An FX Network series, *Justified* succeeds thanks to it elegant direction, superb writing and the performance of leading man Timothy Olyphant. In the role of the hat-wearing, softly-spoken US Marshal, Olyphant is a revelation for anyone who saw his over-the-top performance in *Scream 2*. And it helps that he's given gripping story arcs, moody locations and a fine supporting cast to work with.

Watch this if you like: *Deadwood*, Elmore Leonard, cowboy hats
Buy it: *Justified: Season 1*, *2* and *3* DVDs, £40 each

LOST GIRL

The spiritual successor to *Buffy...*, this fantasy-horror show stars Anna Silk (right) as a succubus who solves supernatural crimes when she's not struggling with a need to feed on sexual energy. And just like *Buffy...* it's the mix of great characters, sharp writing and excellent performances that'll keep you coming back for more. Let's hope we don't have to wait long for Seasons Two and Three to hit DVD over here.

Watch this if you like: *Buffy...*, *True Blood*, succubi
Buy it: *Lost Girl: Season 1* DVD, £30 approx





Surprisingly, the cancellation-happy Fox allowed *Fringe* (top) a full five-year run despite its low ratings

Justified's Rayland Givens (left) is definitely a 'shoot first, ask questions later' kind of cop



While the supernatural stuff is fun, it's the character dynamics that makes *Lost Girl* unmissable TV



stuffmags.com



Ooh là là: *Maison Close* adds a spot of sauce to Sky Arts



MAISON CLOSE

Oiled-up men, moody brunettes and sword-swinging violence – that's TV's *Spartacus* in a nutshell

Hidden away on Sky Arts 2 in the UK, this racy French costume drama about a young woman forced to work in a 19th century Parisian brothel is much more than just a piece of stylish Gallic smut. While there's no shortage naughtiness, the real heart of the series is the way in which it illustrates the corruption that runs rife through every social strata of the city. On top of its lavish production design, *Maison Close* also sounds unexpectedly fabulous thanks to the decision to score it with a mix of everything from '60s psychedelic rock to modern trip-hop.

Watch this if you like: *The Secret Diary of a Call Girl*, *Moulin Rouge!*, burlesque shows
Buy it: *Maison Close: Season 1* Blu-ray, £30 approx

SONS OF ANARCHY

Since its launch in 2008, FX's drama series about a Californian biker gang and its criminal shenanigans has raced along at full throttle, mixing a Shakespearean plot of familial betrayal with lashings of gun-toting, bike-riding action and a deliciously dark sense of humour. Similar in tone to the network's previous award-winning show *The Shield* (where showrunner Kurt Sutter earned his stripes), *Sons of Anarchy* is now gearing up for a sixth season this Autumn, around the same time the fifth run is scheduled to appear on Blu-ray and DVD in the UK.

Watch this if you like: *The Shield*, motorbikes, Ron Perlman
Buy it: *Sons of Anarchy: Season 1-4* Blu-ray boxset, £48 approx

SPARTACUS

Inspired by the success of *Gladiator* and *300*, this smallscreen account of the iconic gladiator who led a slave uprising against the Roman Republic initially grabbed our attention with its no-holds-barred combination of graphic violence and wonderfully inventive swearing. However, over the course of its four seasons, *Spartacus* matured into a far smarter and more complex drama than anybody ever expected – without ever losing touch with its more crowd-pleasing basic instincts. The show's final season hit DVD and BD (alongside a complete series boxset) in the UK at the end of April.

Watch this if you like: *300*, *Xena: Warrior Princess*, gore-strewn violence
Buy it: *Spartacus: Complete Collection* Blu-ray boxset, £90 approx



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SUITS

You may have seen *Suits* advertised heavily on Dave, the UK station that has secured its broadcast rights. And you may very well have ignored it – after all, any good US show is picked up Sky Atlantic, Channel 4 or Five US, right? Wrong.

Made for the USA Network by Aaron Korsh (who has previous credits on the comedy shows *Everybody Loves Raymond* and *Just Shoot Me!*) *Suits* takes a somewhat odd premise – Patrick J. Adams' super-smart college dropout wangles a job at a law firm despite not actually being a lawyer – and runs with it with glee. The writing here is sharp, just like the suits of its über-cool ensemble cast. Its second season ended this February, but a third run is already planned for July.

Watch this if you like: *Boston Legal*, *L.A. Law*, pretending to be a lawyer
Buy it: Season 1, R2 DVD, £10 approx; Season 2, R2 DVD, £21 approx from May 13

THE BRIDGE

Given the glut of Scandinavian crime shows on TV, it takes something special to stand out from the crowd. Enter *The Bridge*'s Saga Norén, a homicide cop whose affliction with Asperger's syndrome makes her blind to any and all social niceties. Give her a partner she doesn't want on a murder case involving tricksy international relations and its no wonder that *The Bridge* is being remade in both the UK and the US.

Watch this if you like: *The Killing*, Stieg Larsson novels, mismatched cops
Buy it: *The Bridge: Series 1* Blu-ray, £30 approx

THE VENTURE BROS.

Following a three-year absence, Jackson Publick and Doc Hammer's geek-friendly cartoon returned to TV screens in the US this month. *The Venture Bros.* follows the continuing exploits of failed former 'boy adventurer' Rusty Venture (think an older, washed-up Johnny Quest) and his two boys Hank and Dean as they deal with attacks by the butterfly-themed villain The Monarch and get caught up in spoofs of old cartoons. 'Go Team Venture!'

Hopefully, the arrival of the fifth season will see a re-release of the previous four DVDs in the UK at a more reasonable price – or you could just import them from the US, especially as the last two seasons are also available on region-free Blu-ray over there.

Watch this if you like: *The Tick*, *Family Guy*, obscure '60s and '70s cartoons
Buy it: *Venture Bros.: Seasons 1-4*, £40 each ■

GOOD NEWS EVERYONE!

Futurama isn't dead – in case you hadn't realised...

This Summer sees the second half of *Futurama*'s seventh season blast off on Comedy Central in the US. However, UK fans will probably have a long wait before they will be able to catch it on DVD or BD.

UK broadcasts of the show have fallen so far behind the US that the last DVD/BD release was 2010's *Season Five* (actually the first half of the show's sixth season). Since then, two further volumes have been released in the US – but these have been repeatedly delayed here. The latest info is that *Season Six* (actually the second half of the sixth season) will now debut on DVD/BD in the UK this August. But given everything that's happened, we're not holding our breath...



The villains are just as much the stars of the show as the heroes in the decidedly adult *Venture Bros.* (below)





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Superhero cinema

The owner of this dedicated den says it's 'perfect'. **Mark Craven** isn't about to argue





THERE ARE MANY things you could do with a 'disused' room in your house. Install a gym, house a collection of rare snakes, set up a tiny restaurant... Or you could opt for your very own high-end cinema room. To us, and the owner of this four-seat movie den, that's the obvious option.

This AV makeover was conducted by London installer Gibson Integration in a property in East Sussex. The client didn't want to get their hands dirty, charging the professional outfit with all aspects of the project, including room and system design, fit-out, joinery, electrical works, lighting design, HVAC (Heating, Ventilation and Air Conditioning) and equipment installation. And it all had to completed within a three-month time frame.

Gibson Integration's Colin Scrivener explains the process: 'The design element of the project included the production of a full suite of architectural drawings, 3D room layout plans, wiring schematics and equipment specification, as well as the interior design, including soft furnishings such as carpet and wall coverings.

'The initial works involved the strip-out of the existing room fabric, including the removal of a spiral staircase at the rear of the room! Acoustically insulated stud walls and ceilings were constructed and the relevant cables installed. Speaker recesses were formed within the screen wall for the left, centre and right speakers as well as for the dual subwoofer. Acoustic treatment was then applied to the surrounding area. Once all electrical and all visual cabling had been installed and checked, we then secured all cables to prevent "resonance rattle".'

It was during this phase that the HVAC work was undertaken, including new piping for the >

Kit checklist

RUNCO: Q-750i LED projector; low-profile ceiling mount
WHITNEY: Fixed anamorphic lens
SCREEN RESEARCH: 100in fixed e-mask screen, 2.35:1
SHERBOURN: PT-7030 AV processor; PA 7-350 power amplifier
FORTRESS: 4 x Matinee motorised reclining seats
PROCELLA: 3 x P8 LCR speakers
PROCELLA: 4 x P6 surround speakers
PROCELLA: 1 x P15 dual 15in subwoofer with 700W amplifiers
OPPO: BDP-95EU Blu-ray player
SKY: Sky+HD receiver
BOXEE: Boxee TV
FURMAN: P-1400 AR E power conditioner
MIDDLE ATLANTIC: 2 x MA-SRSR-X-15 pull-out-and-turn equipment racks
CRESTRON: MTX3 wireless colour touchpanel; MC3 control processor
LUTRON: Grafik Eye QS four-zone dimming module; See Touch keypad
CUSTOM-FINISHED ACOUSTIC PANELS
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room's climate control setup. Then the entire room was plastered in preparation for the interior finishes, including the four-zone Lutron intelligent lighting setup. With the groundwork complete, it was time to start plumbing in the hardware...

American splendour

The cinema room uses some of the finest AV components around, with a heavy American presence. Image-wise (and with no secondary TV screen), everything revolves around the

> 'A Crestron touchpanel and processor provide simplified control over all the hardware and lighting'

ISF-calibrated ceiling-mounted Runco Q-750i LED projector. This fires via a fixed anamorphic lens onto a Screen Research 100in screen with motorised masking.

The screen wall hides the front soundstage of the seven-channel Procella Audio system. Two-way P8 enclosures (with 8in midbass drivers) are used for the left, centre and right channels and a quartet of the voice-matched P6s deliver the rear and surround channels. LFE is provided by Procella's lush, over-engineered twin 15in P15 subwoofer. This is powered by dedicated Procella amplification; the rest of the setup is fed its sonic supper by a Sherbourn processor and power amp. The system easily reaches THX reference level and >



The 100in acoustically transparent fixed screen is from Screen Research



The owner chose his favourite movies to finish the bespoke acoustic panels



The installation included décor, soft furnishings and climate control

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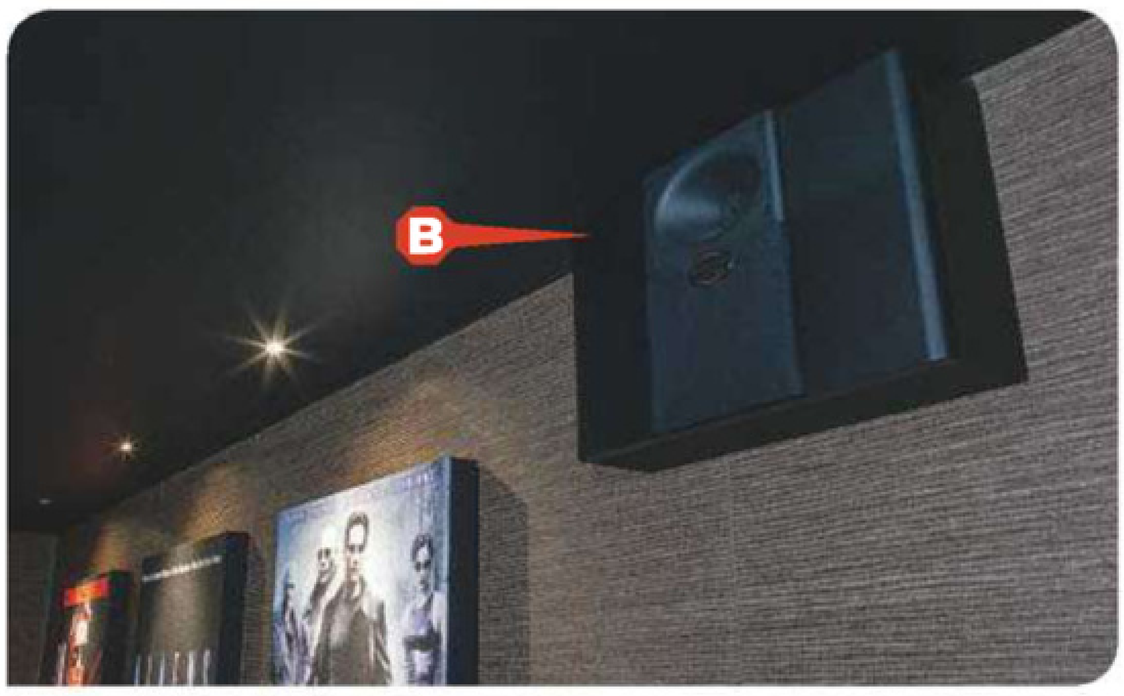
beyond, with half-a-dozen absorption panels – decked out with movie art – aiding acoustics.

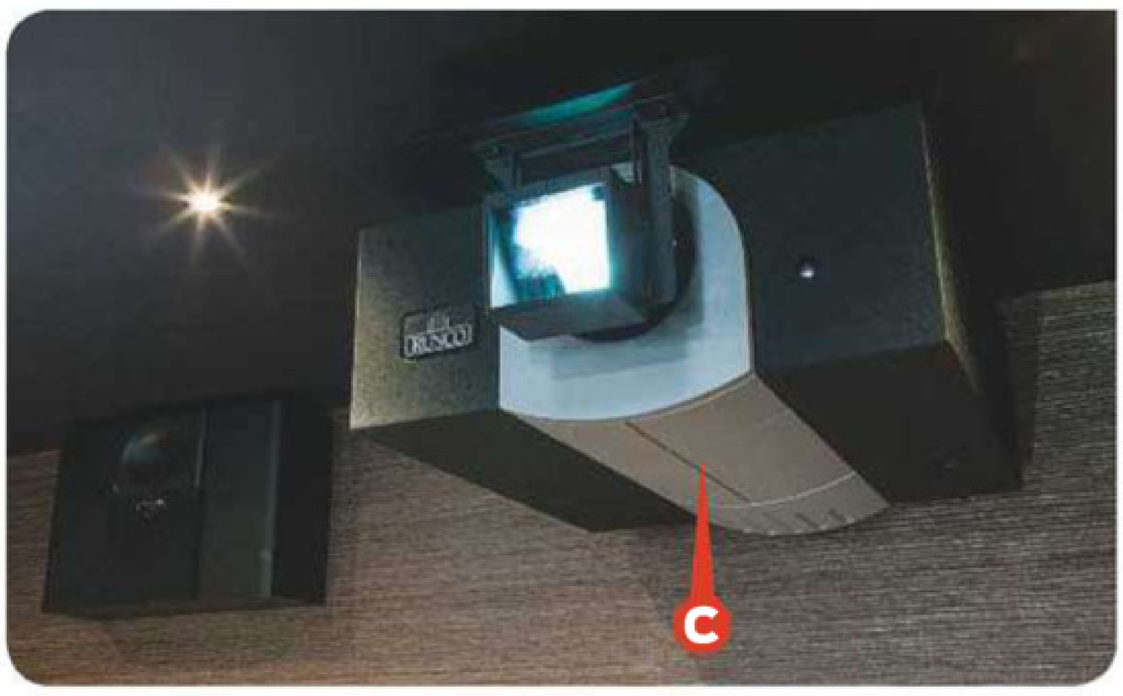
Content for the setup comes via an Oppo BDP-95EU Blu-ray deck, Sky+HD receiver and Boxee TV. This trio of components are housed in ventilated Middle Atlantic racks (along with the processor/amplification and control hardware) at the rear of the room, themselves fitted into a bespoke cabinet for a neat finishing touch, while a Furman power conditioner protects against any unwanted electrical surges.

Naturally for a system at this level, control isn't achieved by a plethora of plasticky handsets. Instead, a Crestron touchpanel and processor have been programmed to provide simplified control over all the hardware, and when a movie starts, the lights dim automatically.

And what does the owner think of the cinema? 'It's perfect!' is the verdict – and the installer is already being sounded out for a multiroom music system. Although to be honest, we'd be loathe to leave this one... ■









Install info

A Fortress of sonic-tude
The cinema features four Fortress motorised recliners, arranged in a shallow crescent formation

B You're surrounded
The surround and rear channels use wall-mounted Procella P6 enclosures. The rest of the speakers are hidden in the screen wall

C Lens flair
Runco's Q-750i projector uses LED illumination technology to craft its Full HD images. Here, it's partnered with a Whitney anamorphic lens

D Universal soldier
Spinning discs is an Oppo BDP-95EU. A true universal player, it allows the owner to gorge on Super Audio CD and DVD-Audio platters as well as Blu-rays and DVDs

E Master and commander
The processor is a Sherbourn PT-7030, which incorporates a pair of high-spec Cirrus Logic 32-bit DSPs. This works in tandem with Sherbourn's flagship 7 x 350W, PA 7-350 power amp

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ROGER EBERT, CHICAGO SUN-TIMES



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REVIEWS

→HARDWARE HIGHLIGHTS **SAMSUNG** 64in flagship plasma & 46in F8000 series LED TV **HUMAX** Second-generation Free Time PVR **PANASONIC** £200 Smart BD spinner **YAMAHA** Nine-channel RX-A2020 AV receiver **LIBRATONE** High-end AirPlay speaker **CABASSE** Designer sub/sat system **SONOS** PlayBar soundbar **ROUNDUP** Five video-on-demand platforms go head-to-head **AND MORE!**

Great Danes

Dynaudio's Excite 5.2 system promises high-end audio thrills. Does it deliver? See p40



HCC RATINGS KEY...

Outstanding	★★★★★
Above average	★★★★☆
Acceptable	★★★☆☆
Disappointing	★★☆☆☆
Dire	★☆☆☆☆

Plasma finds its bright side

Samsung's latest flatscreen reminds **John Archer** why plasma is the serious home cinema fan's TV tech of choice



ACCORDING TO THE current AV buzz, plasma TV technology is on its death bed. Having spent a good while with Samsung's sensational new PS64F8500 plasma TV, though, I can't help but feel that plasma has never been more alive.

This is a bit surprising, actually. After all, Samsung makes no secret of its relative enthusiasm for LCD/LED technology, and last year Samsung lost ground to Panasonic with its plasma TVs. So strong is the Korean brand's apparent desire never to be second-best at anything, though, that its engineers have gone into overdrive with the PS64F8500, re-engineering its panel until it delivers pictures that are genuinely remarkable.

I'll get into these pictures presently, but first I've got some practicalities to cover – starting with the set's design. This is, well, a bit chunky, actually. The Samsung's bezel sticks out more than an inch on all four sides, and its heft is emphasised by its deep, metallic grey finish and the unusual elliptical stand the TV squats down on. The overall look certainly isn't unattractive, but nor does it do much to limit the substantial impact the TV makes on your room. And those with a soundbar may look at the jutting-out stand and weep.

The PS64F8500's connections are extensive, with highlights of four v1.4 HDMIs, three USBs and built-in Wi-Fi. The AV connections are all arranged for side access too, making the set easier to wall mount. Though with this in mind, it seems bizarre that the power connector sticks straight out.

Get your hands dirty

Delving into the PS64F8500's onscreen menus reveals a startlingly expansive suite of picture adjustments, including such calibration-friendly treats as colour, gamma and white balance management, and substantial control over (almost...) all the TV's processing activities.

The highlight of the PS64F8500's operating system, though, is Samsung's new Smart TV engine. This divides content into five categories – TV, on-demand, your own photos/movies/music files, social media, and a straightforward 'apps icon gallery' – each of which gets its own dedicated home screen.

It's all beautifully presented, and via Samsung's new S Recommendation engine, the TV can 'learn' your habits and automatically recommend TV and on-demand content it thinks you'll like based on your viewing history. This can be quite useful, especially as the brand informs us that it will work with Sky and Virgin Media metadata provided an IR extender cable and Samsung's smart remote is used to control the set-top box.

Samsung's online service, meanwhile, is distinguished by huge amounts of streaming video content, including BBC iPlayer, ITV Player, LoveFilm, Netflix, Blinkbox, BBC News, BBC Sport, Curzon on Demand, an Explore 3D channel, Crackle and, soon, 4OD. You can also stream what's showing on your TV to Android/iOS smartphones or tablets, and can share multimedia stored on your smart device with the TV screen.

Clever and pretty though Samsung's new Smart TV interface is, it's also rather inscrutable and confusing, especially before it's had time to learn your viewing habits. The optional gesture and voice controls (the former delivered by a built-in, Skype-friendly camera, the latter via the secondary touchpad remote control) are still too erratic and flawed to encourage use, and talking to a TV still feels a bit odd. And the Social page bizarrely and ineffectively tries to aggregate content from both your Twitter and Facebook pages with a heavy emphasis on video recommendations – activities which don't reflect how we generally consume social media.

Away from the revamped Smart portal, and far more important to AV >

AV Info

PRODUCT:
64in plasma TV with Active 3D

POSITION:
The PS64F8500 sits right at the top of Samsung's 2013 plasma TV range

PEERS:
Panasonic TX-P65VT50; LG 60PM970T



The TV ships with two remotes, one with touchpad and mic

StoreMags.com

BLU-RAY WITH BITE

Does *True Blood: Season 5* look bloody good on BD? p103

Samsung's 2013 plasma features a revamped panel to boost contrast and brightness

HOME CINEMA Choice BEST BUY

fans, are the improvements made to the PS64F8500's panel. Here, Samsung has enlarged the panel's discharge space, introduced a new discharge gas and used new high-efficiency magnesium oxide conduction materials to produce a claimed 250 per cent boost to the screen's brightness.

Of course, it is contrast rather than brightness that is usually plasma's biggest attraction. But here, too, the PS64F8500 claims significant advances, including an improved Real Black Pro Filter that reduces onscreen reflections and the negative impact ambient light can have on plasma pictures; a new contrast-boosting discharge waveform; and quad-core processing, which enables the panel to scan light levels for each image line in real time, as well as being able to achieve peak brightness faster. Putting all these improvements together delivers a claimed 400 per cent contrast boost over last year's models.

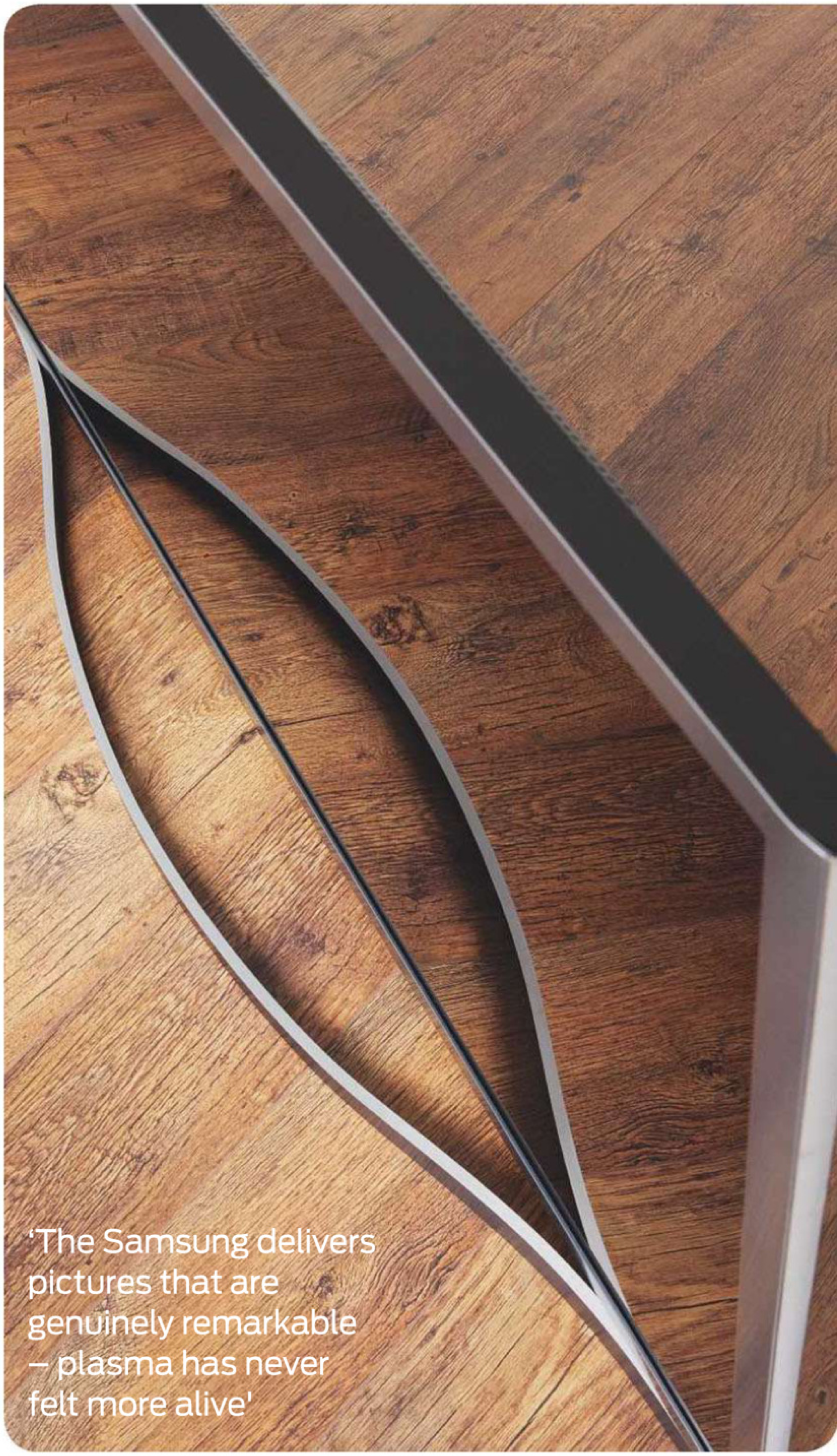
These claims are just numbers, obviously. But the longer I spent ogling the PS64F8500, the more evident it became that these numbers translate into awesome images.

Picture intensity

It's not the individual increases in contrast or brightness that really blew me away, though; rather it's the way the two improvements combine to produce pictures of unprecedented (for plasma) intensity, dynamism and vibrancy. What's more, while I'm used to finding plasma screens losing considerable contrast and vibrancy in bright room conditions, the PS64F8500 retains pretty much all of its image quality even with my room lights turned to their highest level. This is little short of revelatory for a plasma display, and finally makes the technology a direct living room rival for LED screens, rather than it just being a premium home cinema option.

Not that the PS64F8500's unexpectedly brilliant new 'casual' picture credentials stop i t from also being a very good home cinema display. On the contrary, witnessing inky, rich yet nuanced black tones while simultaneously enjoying – in the same frame – bright, vibrant but still subtle and accurate colours never grows old. The remarkable combination of darkness, light and colour on show during the key poker sequences in *Casino Royale*, for instance, goes well beyond anything LCD technology could deliver.

I've mentioned the PS64F8500's colours in passing already, but it's worth adding that as well as combining extreme dynamism for a plasma TV with some brilliantly balanced and natural tones – even where notoriously tricky reds and greens are concerned – the set produces degrees of blend and tonal subtlety that exceed the plasma norm. This means that with the light auras around Gandalf's fireworks show in *The Fellowship of the Ring*,





there was a total absence of striping or banding effects.

The PS64F8500's startling brightness pays off handsomely with 3D movies, too. Watching *Prometheus* and *Frankenweenie* using the two pairs of Active shutter glasses supplied free with the TV, it's great to find a plasma 3D picture not exhibiting the usual enthusiasm-sapping lack of brightness. So punchy do the PS64F8500's 3D images remain, in fact, that you can actually watch them comfortably with the lights on – something that's certainly not the case with other 3D plasma TVs.

The PS64F8500's colour range was also to the fore during 3D viewing – especially during *Prometheus*'s Peter Weyland introductory holograph sequence – and its motion handling is vastly improved from previous Samsung plasma efforts, with far less judder, especially if you use the surprisingly decent judder reduction or Film processing modes.

The extreme contrast range of the PS64F8500 helps the set delineate a startlingly good sense of 3D space too, and detail levels with 3D Blu-rays are incredible, providing an eye-popping reminder of why the Active 3D format was invented.

Stopping the PS64F8500's 3D pictures short of being hands down the best we've seen is crosstalk. For while the ghosting problem isn't severe, we have seen some rival 3D TVs – even a few Active 3D ones – suffer with it less. All the same, for much of the time the PS64F8500's king-sized 3D performance will have your jaw hanging open in awe.

A couple of caveats

While mostly amazing and genuinely groundbreaking, the PS64F8500 isn't perfect. Its picture presets are ill-judged, for starters, with all of the TV's presets bar the Movie one pushing sharpness so hard images look fizzy and gritty, while all the preset modes push either sharpness or brightness/contrast/'cell light' too aggressively.

The Samsung plasma's bright, colourful images hold up well in brightly-lit rooms

Floating blacks are sporadically apparent too, as the set adjusts the picture's brightness and black level 'tone' so aggressively you're distracted by the shift. This still happens even if you deactivate the set's adaptive contrast setting.

Two further issues are likely connected with the huge brightness increase Samsung has delivered. First, bright, static image elements can leave a temporary ghostly 'residue' of themselves behind. This issue should recede over time, though, so just try to limit the screen's exposure to static bright images when you first get your mitts on it.

The other brightness-related issue is greenish dither noise over dark parts of the picture. This is visible to some extent on all plasma panels, but it's slightly more overt on the PS64F8500, particularly over dark but subtly detailed scenes like the opening shot from Chapter 12 on the *Harry Potter & The Deathly Hallows, Part II* Blu-ray, where Voldemort and his army stand at night looking down at Hogwarts. However, this dithering's impact reduces the further you sit from the screen, and the more ambient light you have in your room, making it ultimately a minor distraction from the overall picture excellence.

The PS64F8500's sound, meanwhile, unexpectedly delivers an open, brilliantly detailed, harshness- and muddiness-free soundstage that actually does the huge scale of the images justice. There's even a decent enough sensation of bass to underpin action scenes – although a TV this large and costly deserves to be accompanied by an authentic surround system.

With Panasonic's 2013 plasma TVs still waiting in the wings, the PS64F8500 is one hell of an opening salvo in what looks set to be an absolutely stellar year for plasma. Not bad for a technology that's supposedly on its last legs ■

On the menu



→ All five of Samsung's new content home screens use beautiful, high-resolution graphics, and work slickly. They aren't always logical in their prioritisations, though, and are limited in the amount of content links they provide

Specifications

3D: Yes. Active (two pairs of glasses supplied)
FULL HD: Yes. 1,920 x 1,080
TUNER: Yes. Freeview HD, Freesat HD
CONNECTIONS: 4 x HDMI; 3 x USB; component video input; composite video input; Ethernet; stereo audio input; digital audio output; stereo audio output; CI Slot; PC input; RGB Scart
SOUND: 2 x 10W
BRIGHTNESS (CLAIMED): N/A
CONTRAST (CLAIMED): N/A
DIMENSIONS (OFF STAND): 1482.6(w) x 877.8(h) x 55.4(d)mm
WEIGHT (OFF STAND): 32.8kg
FEATURES: Built-in Wi-Fi; new multi-screen content management system; Smart TV online service including extensive video service support; USB multimedia playback; DLNA network playback; colour management system; white balance management; gamma management; built-in camera; gesture and voice control options; secondary touchpad remote

HCC Verdict



Samsung PS64F8500
→ £3,000 Approx → www.samsung.co.uk
→ Tel: 0330 7267864
HIGHS: Jaw-dropping picture quality; unfazed by ambient light; video-rich online service
LOWS: Minor floating blacks; some dithering during dark scenes; occasionally inscrutable onscreen menus; voice and gesture controls too error prone; retro styling...

Performance ★★★★★
Design ★★★★☆
Features ★★★★★
Overall ★★★★★

storemags

Exciting times for home cinema

Danny Phillips auditions Dynaudio's 'entry-level' Excite speakers with the help of two of the brand's subwoofers and his trusty BD copy of *The Fellowship of the Ring*

DESPITE SITTING AT the entry-level end of Dynaudio's speaker range, the Excite package on test here still adds up to well over £4,000, which gives you a good idea of the Danish brand's audiophile ethos.

The Excite range includes a couple of floorstanders, the X32 and step-up X36; two bookshelf models, the X12 and step-up X16; and the X22 Center. Our system comprises a pair of X32 fronts, a pair of X12s on rear duties and the X22 – topped off (or should that be bottomed off?) by two of Dynaudio's Sub 250 Compact subwoofers.

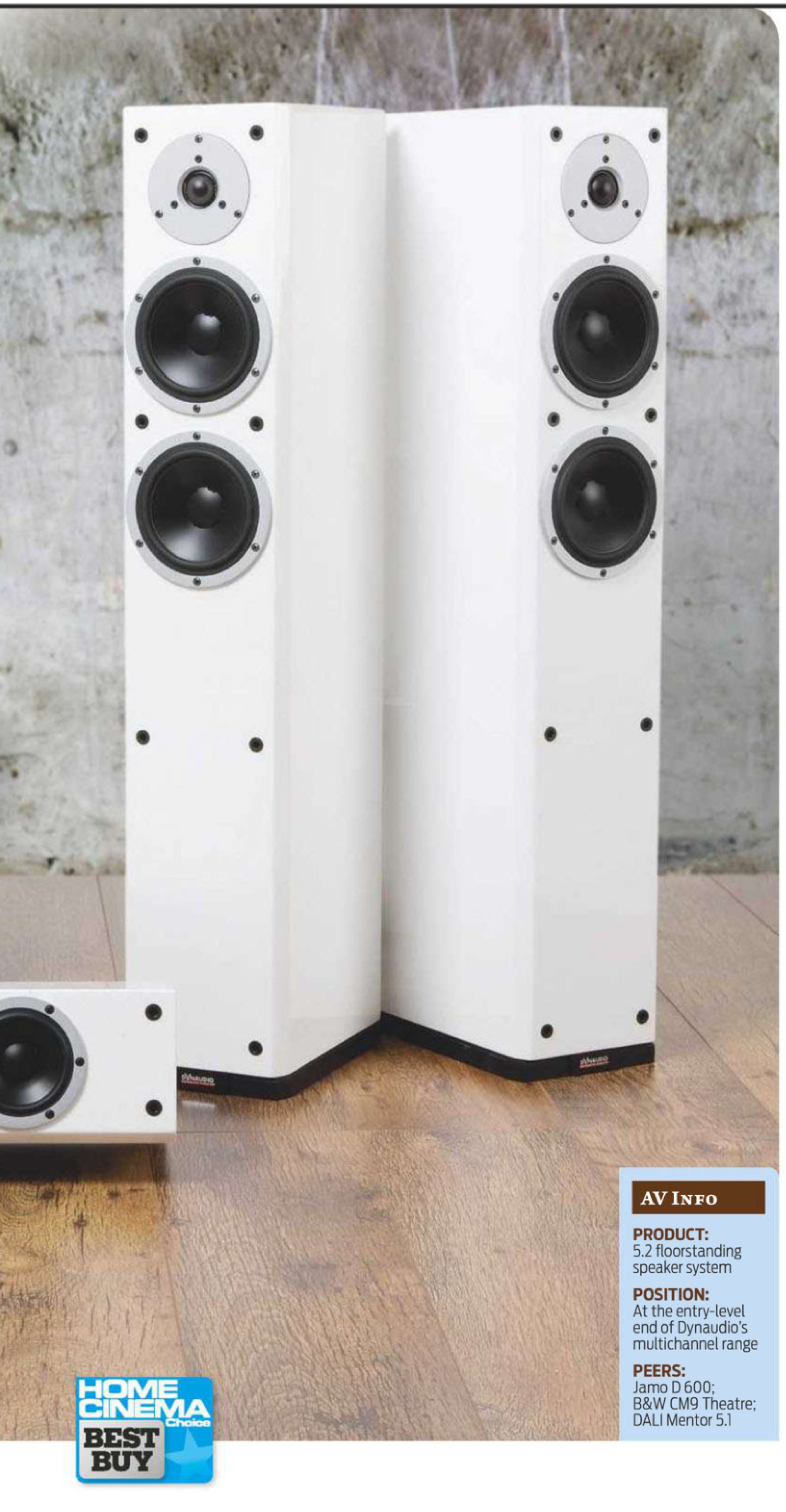
As you'd expect from a self-proclaimed high-end system, the Excite cabinets' build quality and design is exemplary, easily justifying the price tag. At 920mm tall, the X32 fronts aren't massive by any stretch of the imagination, but unboxing them took more grunting and elbow grease than expected. That's testament to the solid Scandinavian craftsmanship in the enclosures, which tip the scales at just over 17kg each.

Design-wise there's nothing particularly radical or showy about the X32s. Their straight lines and right angles result in a boxy appearance – we've seen more curves on a catwalk – but I like the way the front edges slant inwards towards the black cloth grille. Their slim, compact dimensions could be the clincher when convincing your other half to let them in the living room.

Despite a lack of aesthetic envelope-pushing, they carry themselves with undeniable class. This is largely because they're slathered in a crisp, white piano lacquer finish that oozes contemporary panache, as well as forming a striking contrast with the black grille. But if that's too disco for you, they also come in black piano lacquer and more subdued real wood veneers – Maple, Cherry and Rosewood.

Yank the grille from its plug fixings (as we've done for photography) and you'll

The centre enclosure is supplied with a metal stand to angle it upwards



uncover dual 5.5in mid/bass drivers and a 1in tweeter, each framed by an eye-catching silver surround.

The X32 is a traditional two-way speaker but Dynaudio says the use of two newly-designed mid/bass drivers – fashioned from Magnesium Silicate Polymer – means they'll dig out deep bass notes and give the sound more punch.

Centre point

The three-way X22 Center is blessed with more of the same sumptuous build quality and clean lines, but it's on the large side. Again the white lacquer and black grille is a stunning combo, but there's practicality behind the

> 'Build and design are exemplary – and their slim, compact dimensions could be a deal-clincher'

panache – on the bottom is an integrated metal plinth that tilts the speaker upwards to the 'ideal dispersion angle'.

The X12's design mirrors that of the X32, right down to the angled front corners, but they're shrunk to a furniture-friendly 285mm height. Again, build quality is superb, and like all the speakers there are chunky binding posts on the back encased in transparent plastic. Behind the grille sits a single 5.5in mid/bass driver and soft dome tweeter.

Dynaudio is keen to stress its preference for traditional rear speakers over dipoles or bipoles (as favoured by THX), which stems from its belief that dipoles aren't suitable in a living room situation. 'Dipoles and bipoles are designed to take advantage of the sound reflected from the rear wall, therefore the room position, the distance to the rear wall and the wall surface itself all have to be taken into account,' says the brand's product manager, Roland Hoffmann.

'On top of that, dipoles have clear limits in their frequency range. So very often dipoles in the actual room end up giving completely diffuse, artificial surround sound, and on some listening positions it just sounds wrong, especially with music.' Food for thought.

The Sub 250 Compact is Dynaudio's smallest subwoofer and at first glance its cute dimensions don't scream out 'wall-shaking bass' – probably why Dynaudio suggested we audition two of them. But don't let its diminutive size fool you – the 200W amp and 9.5in woofer lurking inside have the potential for some hefty low-end lunacy..

There's plenty to play with on the sub's rear panel. Gain and Sub Lowpass dials let you adjust the volume and crossover frequency

AV Info

PRODUCT:
5.2 floorstanding speaker system

POSITION:
At the entry-level end of Dynaudio's multichannel range

PEERS:
Jamo D 600;
B&W CM9 Theatre;
DALI Mentor 5.1

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StereoMags.com



Build quality through the Excite range is first-rate and the design is very living-room friendly

respectively, while a pair of switches let you invert phase and select between slave and LFE modes. Sockets include slave in/out for daisy-chaining additional subs, plus L/R phono inputs and output.

If you're going to call your speakers Excite, you need to be pretty sure of their ability to entertain – and that's exactly what they do. Rigged up to my Onkyo AVR, the system delivers a thrilling performance with *The Fellowship of the Ring*. It has more than enough

> 'Surround effects are clear and precisely placed, justifying the decision to stick with traditional rears'

muscle to fill a room, lending a greater sense of scale to the majestic Middle-earth soundscapes than you might expect given the speakers' relatively compact dimensions. The X32s and X22 attack effects with relish and bring a silky touch to Howard Shore's sweeping score.

The Excite array is most impressive during the Mines of Moria sequence, but not just the slam-bang bits. It also nails the sense of foreboding dread and tension in the quiet parts, teasing out faint noises and creepy background ambience. When Pippin knocks the dead dwarf down the well, alerting the orcs of their presence in the cave, the clanking armour echoes and reverberates brilliantly around the soundstage, pinging from speaker to speaker with tonal consistency.

Ready to rumble

After the door hits the ground with a tight thump, it all kicks off. The cave troll's bassy footsteps are deep and fulsome but kept in check by the composed Sub 250. Arrows whizz by crisply, swords clash without excessive brightness and there's a convincing metallic jangle as Legolas strangles the troll with the chain.

The soundstage is tight and cohesive, and as the group bustles towards the Bridge of Khazad-dûm accompanied by the soaring, iconic *...Rings* theme, you can actually feel your adrenalin levels rising.

This system doesn't seem quite as assured at high volumes, however. When I really cranked my amp up the speakers lost clarity and composure, struggling to cope with particularly forceful sounds. So, when the orcs and goblins scurry away after hearing Balrog growl, the cacophony of shrieking, clanking armour and scratching claws on stone sounds strained and overpowering, making it difficult to pick out individual elements.

But that's the only real negative aspect of its performance – treat the volume dial with restraint and you get nothing but good vibes.

The centre speaker does a fantastic job with dialogue, making Boromir's mumbled 'What is this new devilry?' as easy to hear as Gandalf booming 'YOU SHALL NOT PASS!' moments later. Grand speeches are delivered with gravitas and orc voices have a serrated, growly edge to them, made possible by the X22's assured detail handling. Surround effects are clear and precisely placed, justifying Dynaudio's decision to stick with traditional rears.

I switched to another fanboy favourite, *Hellboy II: The Golden Army* and was again bewitched by Dynaudio's sonic spell. When the Elemental demolishes a city block, it's conveyed with monstrous power, fleet-footed effects and deep bass as the mega-plant stomps cars to smithereens. Again the creature's screams have a slightly ripe edge with the volume up high, but on the whole it's an absolute blast.

So is this setup worthy of your cash? In terms of build quality, styling and overall performance the answer is a resounding 'yes', although for the money I'd have expected a bit more composure and clarity at high volumes. The similarly-priced THX-certified Jamo D 600 array is more thunderous – but nowhere near as beautiful to look at ■

Specifications

EXCITE X32 FRONT L/R
DRIVE UNITS: 2 x 5.5in mid/bass drivers; 1 x 1in tweeter
ENCLOSURE: 2-way bass reflex
FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 37Hz-23kHz
SENSITIVITY: 87dB
POWER HANDLING: 200W
DIMENSIONS: 170(w) x 920(h) x 270(d)mm
WEIGHT: 17.2kg

EXCITE X22 CENTER
DRIVE UNITS: 2 x 4.25 mid/bass drivers; 1 x 1in tweeter
ENCLOSURE: 3-way bass reflex
FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 58Hz-23kHz
SENSITIVITY: 86dB
POWER HANDLING: 150W
DIMENSIONS: 500(w) x 130(h) x 210(d)mm
WEIGHT: 7.0kg

EXCITE X12 REARS
DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 5.5in mid/bass driver; 1 x 1in tweeter
ENCLOSURE: 2-way bass reflex
FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 50Hz-23kHz
SENSITIVITY: 86dB
POWER HANDLING: 150W
DIMENSIONS: 170(w) x 285(h) x 255(d)mm
WEIGHT: 6.5kg

SUB 250 COMPACT
DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 9.5in woofer
ENCLOSURE: Sealed
FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 29Hz-250Hz
ON-BOARD POWER: 200W
REMOTE CONTROL: No
DIMENSIONS: 266(w) x 271(h) x 286(d)mm
WEIGHT: 7.2kg

HCC Verdict



Dynaudio Excite 5.2
→ £4,500 Approx → www.dynaudio.com
→ Tel: 01353 721089
HIGHS: Gorgeous build quality and classy styling; impressive detail, power and dialogue handling
LOWS: Loses composure and clarity at high volumes; no magnetic fixings for grilles

Performance ★★★★☆
Design ★★★★☆
Features ★★★★☆
Overall ★★★★☆

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Free Time's all-white

Humax has produced a new white PVR for Freesat's Free Time service with built-in Wi-Fi, but is it all that different from its predecessor? **Grant Rennell** investigates

ESSENTIALLY FREESAT'S ANSWER to YouView, the Free Time platform combines a backwards/forwards EPG with web-delivered catch-up TV and video on-demand.

It has hitherto been confined to just the one Humax-made Freesat+ PVR, the HDR-1000S, which has now been joined by this flashier sibling with its Apple-esque white finish. It houses twin tuners and a 1TB hard disk (unlike the 1000S, there's no 500GB option) able to store around 600 hours of standard- or 250 hours of high-definition recordings.

While Humax is keen to point out that a new moulding has been used rather than being a simple 're-spray', the case design closely mirrors that of the 1000S. Sporting much the same distinctive curves, the white fluorescent display is now attractively framed within a black window with a scattering of operating buttons located along the top edge. A flap on the right conceals a USB port (there's another on the rear) while on the right side of the box sits a CI+ slot should Freesat ever consider introducing pay TV.

Again the backplate has an HDMI output, an RGB-capable Scart, a composite video output, optical audio jack and an Ethernet port.

Apart from being in matching white and the 'Home' menu button having been re-located to the middle, the wand-style remote is otherwise pretty much the same as that supplied with the 1000S (and similar to that found with Humax's YouView PVRs) offering neatly arranged, clearly labelled buttons.

A notable improvement on the 1000S is built-in Wi-Fi, allowing you to keep the box uncluttered by network cables or wireless dongles. Wireless networks are detected as part of the setup procedure and you're prompted for passwords.

Setup aside, the Free Time user interface remains unchanged, meaning it still employs flashy graphics, thumbnail images, channel logos and short help videos. Together, these give the impression you're using a distinct service rather than just another Freesat PVR. As with the 1000S, the box can also operate as a standard satellite receiver in 'STB' mode, enabling it to be used for receiving channels not available on Freesat, though functionality is limited (there's no EPG for a start).



AV Info

PRODUCT: Freesat Free Time PVR with 1TB HDD

POSITION: Humax's top-dog Freesat product

PEERS: Humax HDR-1000S; Echostar HDS-600RS; Samsung SMT-7800

StoreMags.com

In the here and now

The HDR-1010S provides numerous ways of finding content. Firstly, the Free Time EPG displays now-and-next data, or what's coming up in the next seven days, in a timeline grid. Clicking on 'Earlier' reveals a list of shows available on catch-up for the selected channel from up to seven days previously, and selecting them takes you to the relevant player. You can also view channels of a particular type or in your favourites list only and schedule recordings (including series) and reminders. Then there's the 'Showcase' menu, which features highlights of what's on catch-up or live TV and can be used to set recordings. You can also search for programmes by title.

It's possible to record two channels at once while playing a recording, watching video-on-demand or using another 'smart' feature. A 'live pause' buffer takes effect when you switch to a channel and can last up to two hours.

The Humax's 'On Demand' menu gives direct access to VOD services including BBC iPlayer and ITV Player – 4oD and Demand 5 are flagged as coming soon (once technical issues have been ironed out, I'm told). Netflix is another rumoured forthcoming addition to Free Time. In the meantime, gorge on the new and very classy HTML5-generated leanback version of YouTube, complete with sorting and search capabilities which can be controlled using a smartphone or tablet. Shame there's no dedicated control/recording app yet for the PVR itself.

As with the HDR-1000S, there's a degree of bonus multimedia functionality on offer besides. Media in a variety of popular formats, including MKV and AVI, can be played from USB or network-connected drives or copied to the internal hard disk drive. Humax's underwhelming TV Portal, meanwhile, includes Flickr, Picasa, Wikipedia, news from *OK!*, *The Daily Star* and *Daily Express*, music videos from Villanoise and Bible TV.

Picture performance is again on the money. The Humax automatically adjusts settings to suit your TV, very effectively upscaling SD broadcasts via HDMI. Native HD broadcasts, from the BBC's HD channels in particular, also look pleasingly sharp. Streaming SD and HD catch-up TV and YouTube clips through my Virgin Media Super Hub located in the same room proved as smooth as could be expected. Audio is delivered without a hitch.

Make your choice

If the change of colour or having built-in Wi-Fi isn't a deal breaker, it's worth bearing in mind that the HDR-1000S can currently be picked up with a 1TB HDD for £20 less. That said, this is an attractive evolution of what was already an solid Freesat PVR to begin with ■



The new, white Humax PVR adds built-in Wi-Fi to the Free Time party

On the menu



➜ The Humax's user interface is a fun place to be, with neat, hi-res graphics and a sensible, easy-on-the-eye layout. Navigation is easy via the bundled handset. The UI on Pure's Avalon Freeview PVR remains the one to beat, though

Specifications

HDD: 1TB
TUNER: Yes. 2 x Freesat HD
CONNECTIONS: HDMI; Scart (RGB/composite); composite video output; Ethernet; 2 x USB; optical digital audio output; stereo phonos; CI+ slot
DIMENSIONS: 352(w) x 55(h) x 238(d)mm
FEATURES: Built-in Wi-Fi; Backwards/forwards EPG; stores up to 600 hours of SD or 250 hours of HD recordings; automatic series recording; favourites list; two-hour buffer; HDMI upscaling; BBC iPlayer; ITV Player; YouTube; TV Portal with Flickr, Picasa, Wiki TV, Wiki How, Teletext Holidays, *OK!*, *The Daily Star*, *Daily Express*, Bible TV, Finance Markets, Villanoise; media playback from USB drives or DLNA/uPnP-networked storage (AVI, XVID, MKV, H.264, MP3)

HCC Verdict



Humax HDR-1010S
➜ £300 Approx ➜ www.humaxdigital.com/uk
➜ Tel: 0844 669 8800
HIGHS: Classy white finish; slick Free Time UI; built-in Wi-Fi
LOWS: Still no Demand 5 or 4oD; limited mobile support; TV Portal not great

Performance ★★★★☆
Design ★★★★☆
Features ★★★★☆
Overall ★★★★☆

Storelings.com

Blu-ray plays the waiting game

The most expensive of Panasonic's 2013 Blu-ray players isn't actually it's flagship deck. Still, says **Mark Craven**, it's a versatile machine that's sure to find fans

PANASONIC'S NEW DMP-BDT330 is a curious beast. The most expensive of the brand's freshly-minted 2013 BD spinners, casual observers could be forgiven for thinking it's the Japanese marque's top HD dog. However, last year's DMP-BDT500 is being retained for another run and still claims flagship status.

This situation (also mirrored by Sony, which is keeping the BDP-S790 in its stable and launching newer decks below it) perhaps hints at bigger things afoot in the Blu-ray world. After all, there's a slight implication that Panasonic's AV engineers have run out of steam, that the DMP-BDT500 is the end of their BD development cycle and they've spent the last twelve months twiddling their thumbs. On the other hand, perhaps they've been busy noodling away on a prototype native 4K player. Indeed, I was told by Tony Itani, the brand's Chief AV engineer, that 2014 could see a return to the 'high-end'...

Regardless, the DMP-BDT330 is new, more affordable than its older sibling and does offer some feature improvements, while jettisoning some others. It targets a different buyer.

Svelte, angular shape

The deck shares a similar styling to last year's DMP-BDT320, the model it effectively replaces. This means that, rather than adopting a full-fat, boxy chassis, it brightens up your AV rack with a svelte, angular shape and shiny silver finish. It will look good next to any of the brand's new LED sets, and everyone else's too, for that matter.



AV Info

PRODUCT:
Mid-range Smart Blu-ray player

POSITION:
Near the top of Panasonic's lineup

PEERS:
Pioneer BDP-450; Sony BDP-S790; Samsung BD-F7500

It weighs a mere 1.6kg, which feels alarmingly like supermarket DVD deck territory, but build quality is more reassuring. It may be light and small, but is well put together.

Connectivity is an exercise in modern digital austerity – the backpanel features nothing beyond two HDMI outputs (Panasonic recommends using the secondary jack for audio to an AVR for peak performance), an optical digital audio out and an Ethernet port. There's no analogue audio provision at all. This explains why the DMP-BDT500 is being kept on; that player offers stereo (and multichannel) phono outputs, Burr-Brown 192kHz/32-bit DACs and a sumptuous music performance. While this new deck will happily play CDs, it doesn't claim to be an audiophile proposition.

Around the front, behind the drop-down flap, are two USB 2.0 inputs and an SD card slot. The latter is a boon for digital camera owners looking for an easy plug 'n' play option.

The player is bundled with a traditional handset. This is good news for those of us who struggled with either the trackpad of the DMP-BDT320 or the hybrid remote of the DMP-BDT500. Technologically it's a backward step. In usability terms it's a progression.

Familiar face

Using either the Ethernet jack or built-in Wi-Fi enables access to the deck's Smart talents. The DMP-BDT330 is running last season's VIERA Connect portal, and not a variation of this year's my Home Screen TV interface. However, the choice in IPTV services is good. There's BBC iPlayer, YouTube, Dailymotion, Acetrax, Aupeo!, Shoutcast and more. Netflix is deemed so important it actually has its own button on the remote.

New this year is MiraCast, which allows users of compatible mobile devices via Wi-Fi Direct to duplicate exactly what's on their smartphone, via the deck, on their flatscreen TV. This link does not use or require a standard LAN to work, and you can Miracast anything from JPEGs to web pages. It's a very neat slice of added functionality. Also joining the feature roster this year is an integrated web browser (because you can never have too many of them).

In use as a media player, the DMP-BDT330 offers broad compatibility with various codecs and containers, but it's difficult not to be disappointed by its somewhat pedestrian presentation, particularly given the glossy nature of the main interface. From USB, the deck plays FLAC, WAV, WMA, AAC and MP3 audio, as well as MKV, AVI, MOV and MP4 video files. What you don't get, annoyingly, is any attempt to render album art.

Across a LAN, MKV files fail to play, although AVI, MP4 and MOVs remain

The player is neatly styled – and, yes, you can turn off the blue LED





The disc tray – and USB and SD card inputs – are hidden behind the DMP-BDT330's drop-down flap

cooperative. Audio-wise, file support stays strong, with all the aforementioned music formats still accessible.

Another new feature over last year is the addition of upscaling Full HD content to 3,840 x 2,160 Ultra HD density. The value of this functionality is debatable, though. While it went untested because we had no 4K displays hanging around, the idea that this inexpensive disc-spinner packs superior image processing to a 4K multicore UHD TV is hard to swallow. And if your display does the upscaling, why opt to do it in the deck instead? Ultimately this provision has more to do with marketing than any real user benefit.

> 'With *Taken 2*, the Panasonic player proves its ability to extract fine details from hi-def discs'

The 4K upscaler appears to be bolted onto the brand's familiar High Precision 4:4:4 processor, which offers Adaptive Chroma Processing upsampling, and 12-bit precision from native 8-bit content.

Quick and sharp

Disc loading speeds aren't too shabby. Basic Blu-rays reach their menus in around 29 seconds, while a Java-heavy *Goldfinger* platter went from tray in to menu in just 48 seconds.

Blu-ray performance is commendable, and you can easily leave the player's subtle picture tweaks (Contrast, Brightness, Sharpness and Colour) untouched. I loaded *Taken 2* on Blu-ray and found myself engrossed in the trailers – clips of the frequent mayhem from both *Skyfall* and *A Good Day to Die Hard* exuded a natural film-like quality and balanced tones. Onto the feature film itself, and the Panasonic proves its ability to extract fine details from hi-def discs. The weather-worn faces of Liam Neeson's soon-to-be dead adversaries in the opening scene are sharply conveyed, all delicate wrinkles and sunburnt eyebrows. Later, even the wide shots of day-lit Istanbul don't exhibit any overt digital noise.

It's a clean, engrossing presentation – and the bass-heavy multichannel score of the action sequel, meanwhile, is delivered with considerable heft. It's important to note, however, that out of the box the player is set to output only the core lossy DTS and Dolby Digital bitstreams from BD discs – you'll need to switch BD-Video Secondary Audio to 'Off' from the Digital Audio Output menu to rectify this.

The Panasonic naturally offers 2D-3D conversion, but I found the benefits of ret-conning Liam Neeson's peril minimal. Much more fun can be had from a native stereoscopic disc, such as Paul W.S. Anderson's riotous *The Three Musketeers*, which positively oozes depth.

Easy to accommodate

Overall, the DMP-BDT330 is a likeable disc player. Its design and form factor make it easy to squirrel away in a second room or on an AV shelf. Of the new features this year, Miracast is very handy, 4K upscaling probably less so. And Panasonic's reversion to a traditional handset should be applauded.

At £200, it's hardly a budget option, but does include niceties that you won't find on bargain-bin spinners, such as twin HDMI outputs. However, also at this price point you'll find the likes of Pioneer's BDP-450, which is a universal deck offering SACD and DVD-Audio in place of a dedicated Smart portal. And an extra £100 can get you the more potent DMP-BDT500. Decisions, decisions... ■

On the menu



→ The main home screen is gloriously clean and swift in operation (the Viera Connect portal still feels a little slow by comparison). Drilling down to the menus takes away some of the icon-laden shine, but picture, sound and 3D adjustments can at least be overlaid on disc content

Specifications

3D: Yes. Plus 2D-3D conversion
UPSCALING: Yes. To 4K
MULTIREGION: No. Region B BD/R2 DVD (but you might find a hacked version if you look around...)
HDMI: Yes. 2 x outputs
COMPONENT: No
MULTICHANNEL ANALOGUE: No
DIGITAL AUDIO: Yes. 1 x optical output
ETHERNET: Yes
BUILT IN WI-FI: Yes
SACD/DVD-A: No
DOLBY TRUEHD/DTS-HD DECODING: Yes
DOLBY TRUEHD/DTS-HD BITSTREAM: Yes
DIMENSIONS: 430(w) x 41(h) x 181(d)mm
WEIGHT: 1.6kg
FEATURES: Viera Connect Smart hub, including Netflix, Acetrax, BBC iPlayer and web browser; SD card slot; 2 x USB inputs; media playback from USB, SD card and DLNA; Miracast content sharing via Wi-Fi Direct; 3D Effect Controller; user-definable Contrast, Brightness, Sharpness and Colour settings

HCC Verdict



Panasonic DMP-BDT330
→ £200 Approx → www.panasonic.co.uk
→ Tel: 0844 844 3852

HIGHS: Commendable AV quality; neat form factor; Miracast feature; 4K upscaling should you feel the need for it

LOWS: Doesn't offer the new My Home Screen Smart portal; no analogue outputs; audio output needs tweaking

Performance ★★★★½
Design ★★★★
Features ★★★½
Overall ★★★★

Miniature IR Distribution Amplifier

The new IRBKIT Mini from Keene is a really tiny yet fully featured IR Distribution Amplifier. Compact and light enough to stick on the back of your display it's great for wall mounted Apple TV and similar installations. It also has a special "direct" input that can accept any manufacturers IR Blaster output and re-distribute to more emitters. With a USB power option for added convenience, this is a tiny yet powerful IR package.

Fascia Mount Kit

Supplied with a Fascia mount receiver and single emitter this is designed to allow IR control of devices out of sight behind the display or cabinet.

[IRBKITMF] **£65.02** (inc mains USB supply)
[IRBKITMFC] **£47.43** (USB power cable only)

Direct Input Kit

Supplied with a direct input cable (no receiver) and 2 x twin emitter wands this is the one to choose if you want to distribute the IR Blaster output from another device, (eg HDMI extender) to control up to four more devices

[IRBKITMD] **£61.40** (inc mains USB supply)
[IRBKITMDC] **£54.41** (USB power cable only)

Key Features:

USB Power Connection.
Compact Size (60mm x 35mm x 20mm)
Dual Outputs
IR Receiver Input
Direct Input





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- HDMI input up to 15m with 8-bit deep colour, or 10m with 12-bit deep colour
- Supports HDMI output up to 15m with 8/12-bit deep colour
- Supports IR and RS-232 Control
- Supports High Definition LPCM 7.1CH, Dolby TrueHD, Dolby Digital Plus and DTS-HD Master Audio



Code PU513L **£253.78**

Digital to Analogue Audio Convertor with USB

This DAC has all of the inputs and outputs the everyday audiophile will need. One optical, one coaxial, and one USB inputs are enough for most applications. Up to three digital sources - Blu-ray player, cable box, CD player, computer, DVD player, HD games console, media player and set-top box etc. can be connected concurrently using S/PDIF coaxial, toslink optical inputs or USB port. DAC is the ideal convertor for music lovers seeking an excellent value upgrade to 24 bit advanced HD (high definition) audio.

- Support up to 24 bit / 192 KHz
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- Works with all audio formats, the higher bitrate the better
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- Connect audio player or any device with a digital output
- Connect stereo output to power amplifier for playback over speakers
- Adjustable headphone output is provided for personal listening
- Power supply (5 VDC) either USB or external USB power adaptor



Code DAC **£39.00**

Keene IR Distribution Amplifier

- External receiver routes IR signals to internal wands
- Control all your equipment even when inside a cabinet
- Works with all popular remotes
- Complete system, easy to install and ready to use



Code IRBKITS **£48.00**

Wireless Full HD + 3D HDMI

- Connect, split and replace your HDMI cable wirelessly
- Replace your HDMI cable wirelessly and locate your HDTV or projector wherever you want
- Mount the receiver (out of sight) behind your HDTV or on the ceiling next to your projector
- No more visible cables
- Watch up to 2 (HD) devices such as Blu-ray® players, digital video recorders (DVRs), HD set-top boxes, PS3™ or Xbox® game consoles or standard DVD players/ recorders elsewhere in your home and easily switch between the sources connected without changing plugs
- Suitable for Full HD 1080p and all 3D formats
- The built-in HDMI splitter means that you can also connect an HDTV to the Transmitter so that you can continue to watch the connected devices locally
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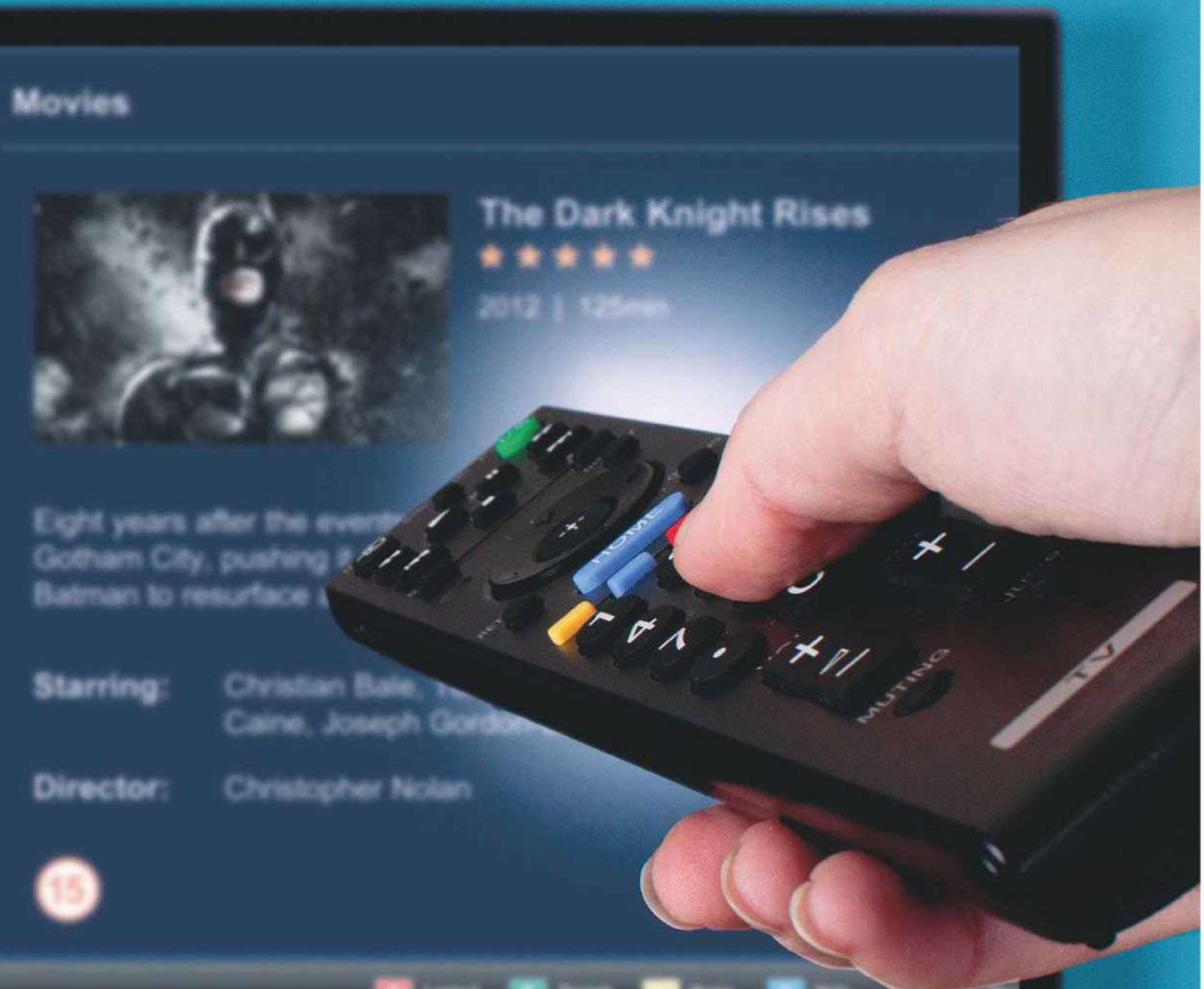
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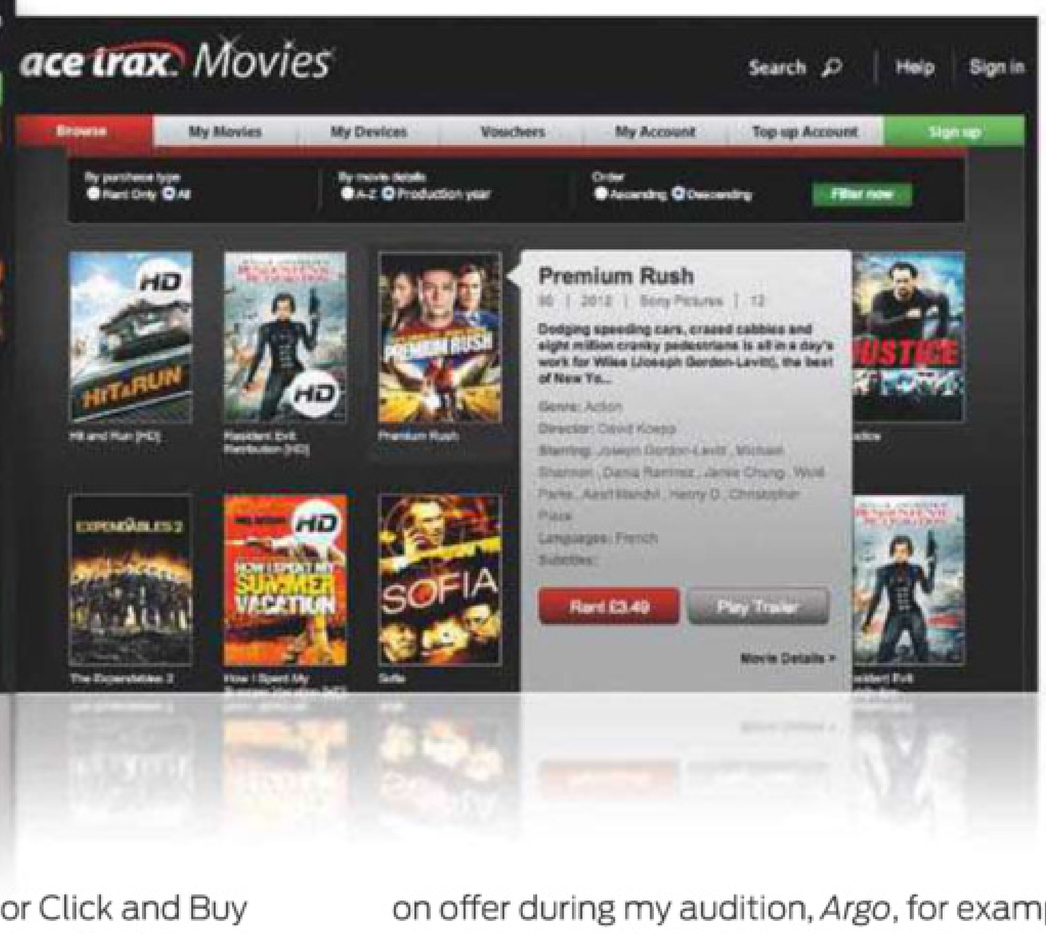
Movies on demand!



Fancy a break from buying Blu-rays? Just give one of the movie-streaming services a whirl. **Adrian Justins** tests Acetrax, Blinkbox, LoveFilm, Netflix and Now TV to see which offers the best content, quality and value for money

Few Aces up its sleeve

Acetrax offers new movies to both rent and buy, but in use it's somewhat frustrating





AFTER PAYING £3.49 to rent a Danny Huston movie called *Boxing Day* through the Acetrax app on a Samsung Smart TV, I sat back and grabbed a handful of popcorn. An onscreen message told me the movie might take two minutes to load, so I waited – I'm patient and I'd paid good money. Ten minutes later, I was still staring at a blank screen. The popcorn did little to mask the sour taste left in my mouth...

Since I first logged in to the account I had considerable trouble with Acetrax. Where was the message about having to register my TV as a playback device through the Acetrax website? Since I'd already given up on one Samsung Smart TV (the brand-new F8000 screen), I switched to another TV. I knew the drill. I checked online and saw that my screen was already listed as a registered device, although a message said to select the device and complete the registration. When I tried to do so it said it was already registered. Registered by me presumably, but who knows? There's also another generic device listed, which may have been the other TV. Or was it my computer? Again, who knows?

Big Swiss VOD cheese

Acetrax is a Switzerland-based subscription-free movie rental and purchase service that has appeared as an app on Smart TVs since Smart TVs were invented. It ought to know what it's doing by now. Instead, it feels like a fledgling operation, overcomplicating matters such as adding credit, which has to be done using PayPal or Click and Buy through the Acetrax website. Within the app, latest rentals are oddly listed under latest movies to buy, and vice versa. You get the feeling the Smart TV app is an afterthought, as the website is easier to use and, with a browser running Silverlight, a reasonable place to watch movies.

When you join Acetrax you get a £3.49 voucher, which can only be spent on a rental, and is insufficient for an HD title, which typically costs £4.49. You get a 30-day window to watch a rental, and 24 hours before a title expires once activated, and you're allowed to use up to two registered devices at any one time. The system isn't clever enough to pick up on one device where you left off on another. Like most VOD services, there are no chapters and no way of creating bookmarks.

Maybe Sony is the really Smart brand since it is the only major TV manufacturer not to support Acetrax. The app can also be found on a smattering of Blu-ray decks, three types of media player, Samsung Galaxy phones, plus tablets from Acer, Lenovo and Toshiba. Other Windows, Android and all iOS devices are excluded from the Acetrax club.

The app's home page is a little messy but you can choose to browse rentals or purchases, with subfolders for New, Most Popular and Our Pick. Patience is required when waiting for the sleeve art to populate, as it is when playing back, even on the website.

Acetrax claims earlier access to blockbusters than the likes of Netflix and LoveFilm, but while there were 230 HD titles on offer during my audition, *Argo*, for example, was not in HD. Also annoying is that you can pay for an HD title on the website but viewing in HD is not allowed on a computer. Purchased standard-definition titles can be downloaded, but only to PC computers.

There are 28 rentals at £1.49, all non-HD. *Boxing Day*, like most titles, looked reasonable on the website, and made the move to fullscreen viewing quite well. A handful of titles offer Dolby Digital Plus surround sound but most are regular stereo.

Conclusion

Acetrax is a welcome rival to Netflix and LoveFilm, in that it provides HD titles (including new releases) without the need for a monthly subscription, and is available on plenty of net-connected TVs, but the awkward user interface, relatively high cost of rentals and lack of 1080p video count against it.

Specifications

AVAILABLE ON: Smart TVs and some Smart Blu-ray decks from LG, Samsung, Philips, Toshiba, Sharp, Panasonic; Acer, Lenovo and Toshiba tablets; web browsers with Microsoft Silverlight
1080P VIDEO: No. 576p or 720p maximum
5.1 AUDIO: Yes. But most titles are in stereo
PRICING: Rentals from £1.49 to £4.49; purchases from £5.99 to £11.99
NUMBER OF TITLES: 1,000+ movies; no TV shows
DOWNLOADABLE: Only on Windows PCs (and for purchases only)

Supermarket sweep

Owned by Tesco, Blinkbox is rich with content – but don't expect anything in hi-def



OWNED BY TESCO, Blinkbox's digital aisles are crammed with over 10,000 titles, and beyond the odd bit of horse meat you'll find choice cuts – while I was browsing, the likes of *Argo*, *The Dark Knight Rises* and the entire James Bond catalogue were prominent, with *Django Unchained* and *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* due to appear. Blinkbox is also aggressively adding TV shows, such as *Mr Selfridge*, within a heartbeat of their original broadcast date.

Subscription-free Blinkbox offers its vast catalogue of movies and TV shows to rent and purchase. Rented movies and TV episodes are available for 30 days. Once you start playback you can watch a title as many times as you like for 48 hours. Buy it, and it's yours forever (with strings attached). The platform also plans to introduce some free content by the Summer.

The Sweeney (2012 movie) is typical of a latest release, priced at £10.99 to buy or £3.49 to rent, although *The Pirates! In An Adventure With Scientists* sells for £6.99. Most TV shows are priced at £1.89 per episode or £9.99 per series regardless of the number of episodes.

To buy or not to buy?

Deciding whether to rent or buy can be a tricky decision. There is a fiscal advantage clearly if you expect to watch something repeatedly but unless you're familiar with a title you may not feel well enough informed to make the call. But the decision is often made for you, as many titles are offered only for rent or only for purchase.

The Blinkbox option really only makes financial sense if you don't intend to watch more than a few titles per month, although since it costs nothing to be a member you can always use it in addition to subscription services to get access to otherwise unavailable titles, such as *An Idiot Abroad*.

Currently only Smart TVs from Samsung, LG, Philips and Toshiba feature a Blinkbox app, but it can also be found on connected LG Blu-ray decks, set-top boxes and some consoles. You can authorise up to five devices to use with your account, and can only swap from one to another three times every 90 days.

Studio restrictions currently prevent the transfer of a downloaded title to a portable device, although Blinkbox says it is looking into ways of making its content available on a wider variety of devices. Currently, even though you may have paid £10 to own a movie or TV series you can't actually download it or burn a copy of it. You simply own the right to watch it if you have a working internet connection and can log in to Blinkbox on an approved device. Not ideal if you own, say, *The Big Lebowski*, yet cannot watch it offline when on a plane or on holiday.

> 'Blinkbox has over 10,000 titles, and is adding TV shows within a heartbeat of the original broadcast'

Browsing is a reasonably pleasant experience, but some folders, such as Top Crime within the TV section, appear empty. And searching requires persistence. For example, with *An Idiot Abroad* the title didn't appear in the shortlist until the first 'd' was entered, but *Batman* did. Weird.

The main drawbacks to Blinkbox are that playback is prone to stuttering (even occasional freezing) and its maximum resolution is 480p. Woody Allen's *Whatever Works*, for example, appeared generally soft, a bit noisy and prone to jaggies. And fast forwarding is quick but hard to track.

Conclusion

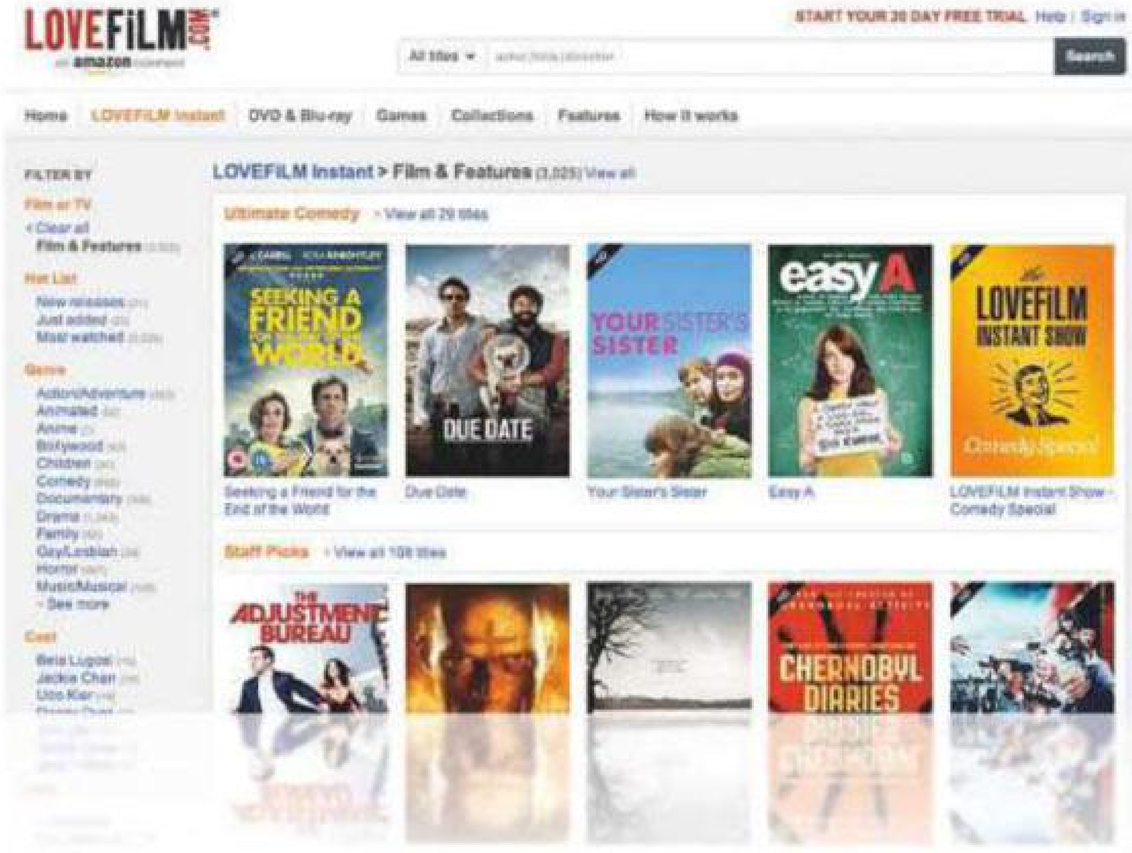
By only offering SD video, Blinkbox has a hard job persuading AV-hedz to give it much thought, but its decent range of content, pleasant user interface and pricing structure make it worth considering on a casual basis. >

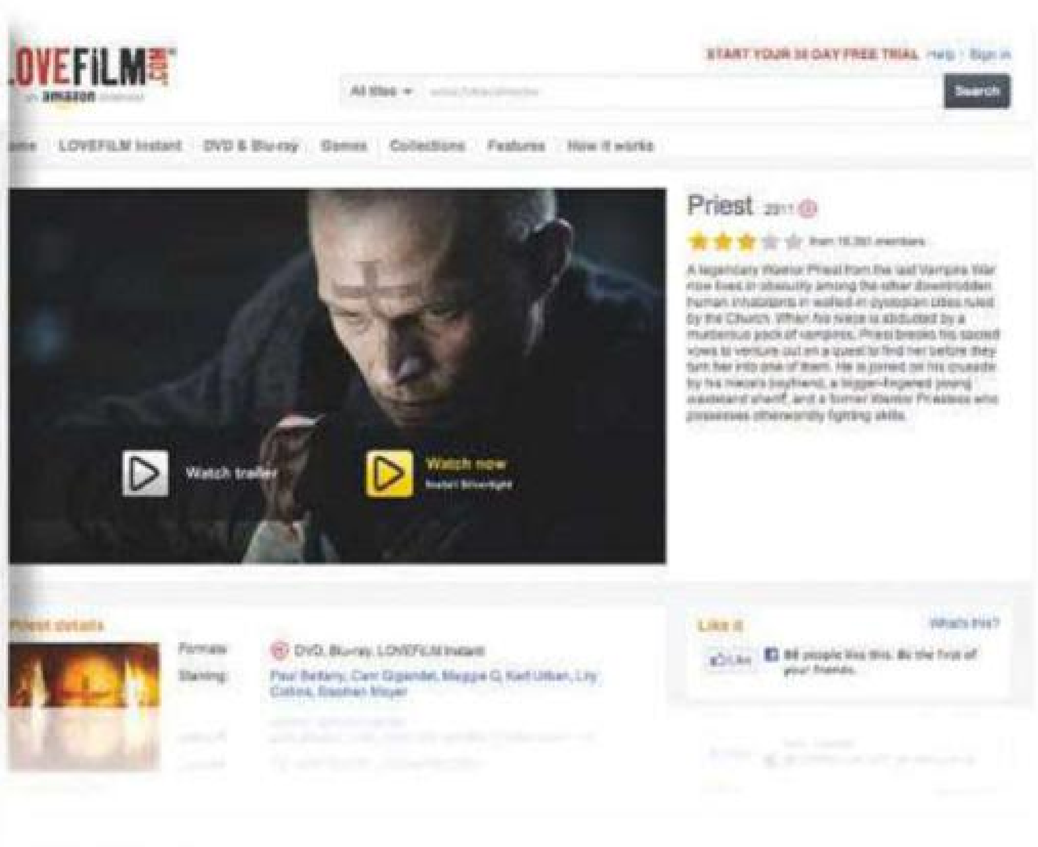
Specifications

AVAILABLE ON: Samsung, LG, Philips and Toshiba Smart TVs; LG Blu-ray decks; Technika & LG set-top boxes; Xbox360, PS3, iPad, Android Tablets; web browsers with Microsoft Silverlight
1080P VIDEO: No. 480p
5.1 AUDIO: No. stereo
PRICING: Rentals from 99p to £3.49; purchases from £1.89 to £10.99
NUMBER OF TITLES: 10,000 approx (roughly 75 per cent movies, 25 per cent TV)
DOWNLOADABLE: No

Love is in the air

LoveFilm Instant's tempting price tag and device support make it a solid option





TOP DOG IN the DVD and Blu-ray rental game, when it comes to video-on-demand LoveFilm has been a bit slow out of the blocks, although understandably (given licensing restrictions) not all of the titles that can be rented on disc are available online, and vice versa.

The current subscription to LoveFilm Instant is just under a fiver (described as a special launch price) and provides online access to a catalogue of nearly 4,000 titles, over 75 per cent of which are movies. Adding a disc rental package costs a minimum extra £3 a month (for unlimited rentals with only one disc at home at a time).

All of the Instant titles can be watched on any broadband-connected computer running Silverlight or on a smart device running the LoveFilm app. This is less prevalent than Netflix on Smart TVs, with no presence at the time of writing on Panasonic, Toshiba and Philips screens. Whilst can you stream movies to an iPad, there are restrictions on how much you watch each month unless you're paying at least £9.99 per month for a disc/streaming combi package.

Like most VOD services, the LoveFilm experience is not as slick on a Smart TV as it is on the website. Because LoveFilm doesn't want you to miss out on a title if it isn't available for streaming, the app also shows what's available to rent on Blu-ray and DVD. Filtering is possible, but it's rather a faff. Worse, though, is that the search engine is unreliable. To watch *The Inbetweeners* (TV series) I did a search in the LoveFilm app on Samsung's 46F8000 screen. The 2011 *The Inbetweeners* movie appeared as a disc rental option, but not as an Instant title, and the TV series, which is available online, simply wasn't listed. Yet browsing through the collections folder within the app revealed the entire TV run. Ridiculous.

The interface is decent enough, with large images accompanying each title card. The home page is dominated by 10 scrolling recommendations with smaller portals labelled Watch Now, Search, Rent by Post and Help. Watch Now contains five sub-folders: Pick of the Week, Most Popular, Highly Rated, Genres and Collections. There are 18 genre sub-folders and 100 collections, many of which are simply different series of TV shows.

There isn't exactly a wealth of recent releases. During my test, the two highest-rated titles were the Sandra Bullock movie *The Blind Side* from 2009 and the equally ancient *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*, whilst the Exclusive collection folder included *Cockneys vs Zombies* and *Chernobyl Diaries*.

Audio is exclusively non-surround but is generally clean and clear. Not all movies are in 1080p HD, and where it is available, it appears a tad soft and doesn't have the clarity you'd get from a Blu-ray. SD quality is decent but an otherwise enjoyable stream of *Office Space* was spoiled by the distortion caused by the adoption of a 16:9 aspect ratio. *Lawrence of Arabia*, on the other hand, was presented with the correct ratio and proved vastly superior to my old DVD. There are no chapters or bookmarking, and forwarding or rewinding is at maximum 16x normal speed, but is easy to track. Stability isn't quite on a par with Netflix and judder is more prevalent.

> 'Combining LoveFilm Instant with its Blu-ray rental package – ensuring AV quality – might suit your needs'

Specifications

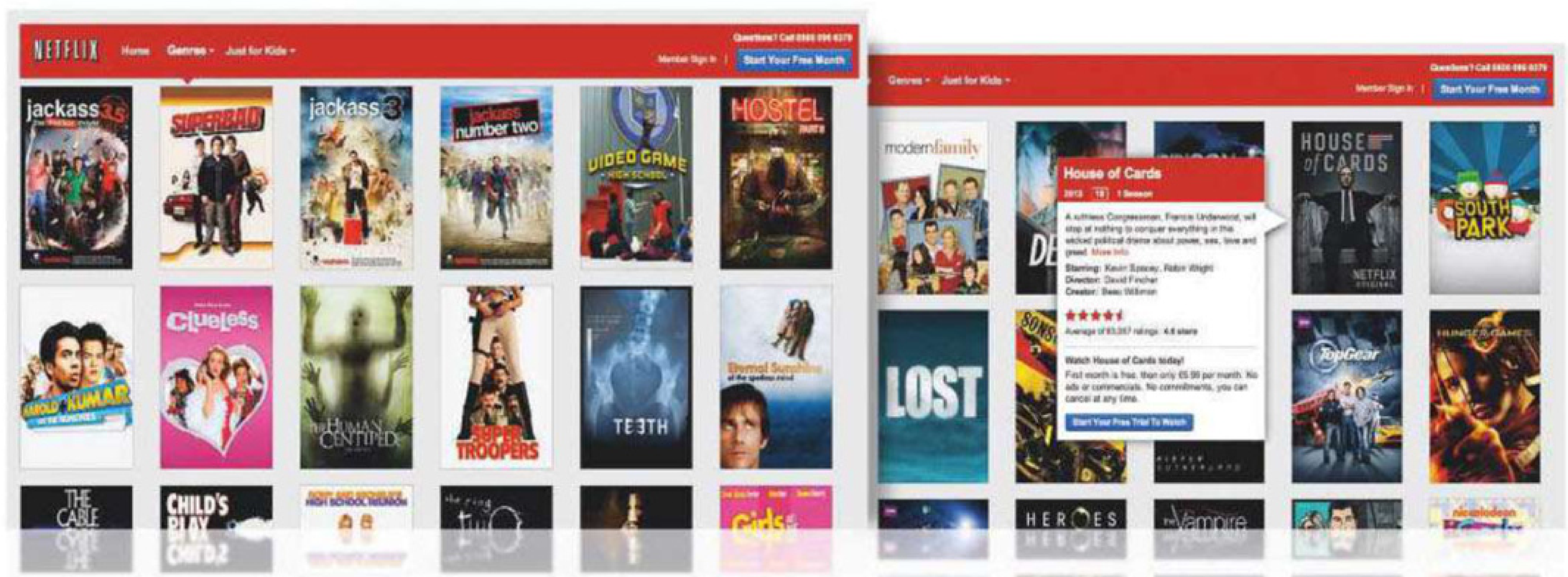
AVAILABLE ON: Sony, Samsung, LG, Cello Smart TVs; Xbox 360, PS3, Nintendo Wii; Samsung, Sony, LG Blu-ray decks; Digitalstream PVR; Sony Network Media Player; Kindle Fire HD; iPad; web browsers with Microsoft Silverlight
1080P VIDEO: Yes (PC/Mac only); otherwise 720p
5.1 AUDIO: No. Stereo
PRICING: £4.99 per month without disc rental
NUMBER OF TITLES: 4,000 approx (75 per cent movies, 25 per cent TV)
DOWNLOADABLE: No

Conclusion

LoveFilm Instant has a lot going for it – an affordable monthly subscription, plenty of movies and HD provision – but it has a fight on its hands from the similar Netflix platform. Combining it with a BD rental package, ensuring AV quality and brand-new releases, is probably the way to go – but that costs more.

Born in the USA

Massive in the US, Netflix is growing rapidly here too, thanks to quality AV and original content



NETFLIX APPARENTLY RESPONSIBLE FOR a quarter of all web traffic in the US last year, Netflix offers a simple proposition: unlimited streaming for a fee of £5.99 a month, with no minimum contract. And like LoveFilm it offers a month's free trial.

As well as appearing on more Smart TVs than any other VOD platform, you can view Netflix on some connected Blu-ray decks (eg Pioneer), plus a Mac or PC, and there are apps for a wide range of devices including the Xbox 360, PS3, Wii, Roku, iPad and Android tablets. The usual caveat applies that you need to be hooked up to an internet connection but there is no restriction on the number of devices you can run your account on. Unusually, there are bespoke apps for Apple TV, the iPhone and iPod Touch and, conveniently, you can pause a show on one device, log in to the app on another one and pick up watching from the same point.

The UK Netflix service has fewer movies than its American counterpart, and recent research by ORIC showed its catalogue of movies numbered under 1,700, whilst it had over 400 TV titles, which added up to over 900 series. Netflix doesn't have the very latest releases but its number of 2012 titles is double that of its main rival, LoveFilm (41 compared with 18). Very few titles appear on both LoveFilm and Netflix.

Content-wise, Netflix has caused a stir by getting in to the production business. Shows such as its $100m remake of *House of Cards* and the imminent and eagerly-awaited new series of *Arrested Development* are trying to redefine the way in which some of us watch TV, with all episodes made available simultaneously. Never before, says Netflix, has the viewer had so much control over where and when they watch previously unbroadcast content.

The main UI fills the screen with images of DVD sleeves of what at first seems like random titles but is based on your preferences (specified at registration) and viewing history. Recently-watched titles appear first, making it easy to dive in and pick up the next episode of a currently watched series. Selecting a title brings up a synopsis, user ratings and options for subtitles and audio. If you choose a TV series you've been previously watching, the interface automatically lines up the episode after the one you last watched.

There's an option for registering using Facebook but you can opt not to share your viewing habits with your universe of digitally encountered friends. Uniquely, Netflix also provides an option for selecting kids-only content at log-in for parents looking to leave prying nippers unattended.

HD by default

Movies and shows are streamed in HD by default if the device supports it (a minimum 5Mbps connection is also needed). Netflix calls this Super HD, but we know it as 1080p. HD or not, everything looks ropey for the first 30 seconds or so but soon sharpens up, and almost without exception, is streamed stably without any stuttering. The absence of chapters can be frustrating but pausing and winding through a movie or show is aided by the presence of large thumbnails.

All titles have a stereo soundtrack but there are plenty that also serve up a Dolby Digital+ 5.1 alternative, although you may find yourself at the mercy of your device's audio output options. Despite the reliability of the picture, during my test the DD+ option failed to work during a couple of episodes of *House of Cards*. Where it worked, it worked brilliantly.

Conclusion

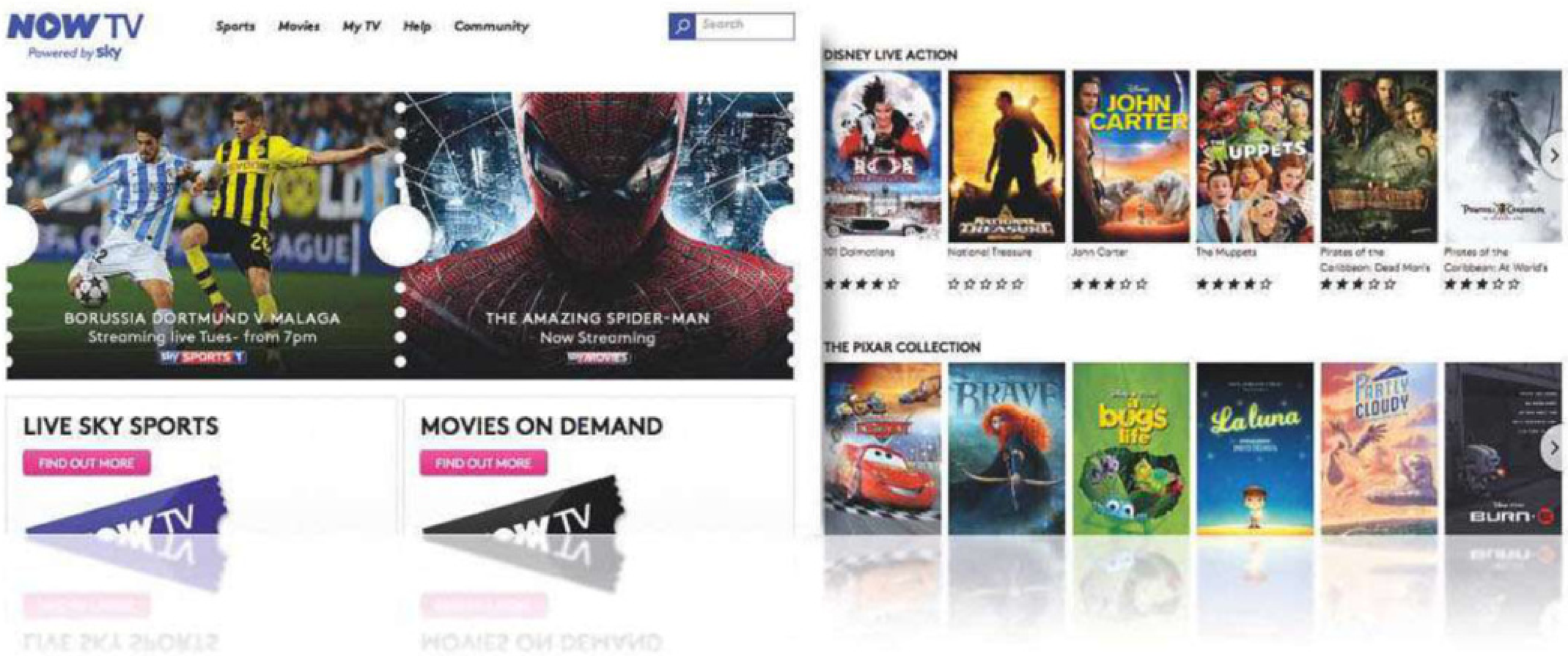
Thanks to its heavily-advertised *House of Cards* Netflix is the hot topic in VOD circles, and overall it's a decent subscription platform, with 1080p video, 5.1 streams, excellent user interface and wide-ranging device support. Film content, however, is perhaps not as good as you might expect. >

Specifications

AVAILABLE ON: Smart TVs and Smart Blu-ray decks from LG, Samsung, Sony and Panasonic; LG Smart home cinema systems; Pioneer Smart BD decks; Apple TV, Philips, Roku and WD media streamers; Android phones and tablets, Windows mobiles, iPad and iPhone; PS3, Xbox 360, Wii, Wii U; web browsers with Microsoft Silverlight
1080P VIDEO: Yes (aka Super HD), min 5Mbps connection
5.1 AUDIO: Yes, DD+ on some titles
PRICING: £5.99 per month
NUMBER OF TITLES: Approx 1,700 movies, 400 TV
DOWNLOADABLE: No

Sky's service has its limits

Now TV is a great option for watching new movies, but it's expensive and hard to find at present



SKY'S NOW TV is not to be confused with Sky Go and Sky Go Extra, which provide Sky subscribers with a means of watching their subscription channels on portable devices, either live, or cacheable for offline access for a monthly fee of £5, in the case of Sky Go Extra.

Now TV is, however, similar to Sky Go in that it works on computers with Silverlight-compatible browsers, plus dedicated apps for iPhones, iPads and Android devices. Accessing Now TV on AV devices is currently something of a challenge as Sky hasn't yet got much penetration. It can be found on the PS3, Xbox 360, YouView boxes and Roku streaming devices. You can use only two devices at any one time, plus you can only change to other devices once a month.

If you don't have any of the above, it is possible to watch Now TV on your main living room screen by mirroring your computer or phone/tablet's display using a cable. This is an inelegant solution at best as both devices need to be showing the same content, plus site navigation and playback control can only to be done on the original device. But it does do the job (I used a Thunderbolt-to-HDMI adapter with a MacBook Pro) and is cheaper than buying a new playback device.

Now TV is something of a misnomer, because (unlike Sky Go) it doesn't yet offer access to Sky's television channels or shows other than Movies and Sport (Sky Atlantic, Sky 1, Sky Living and Sky Arts are planned to launch later). And with only just over 300 on-demand titles some will think £15 a month is expensive (although you do get a free month to try before you buy and there's no contract). But the big draw is that many of the titles are exclusive to Sky for as much as a year before its rivals (Pixar's *Brave* for example is available now, and 20 premieres are promised each month), plus you can watch Sky's movie channels live (except on YouView) without the commitment of a long-term subscription. Sport is not included in the monthly fee and is priced at a hefty £9.99 for a day pass to all the sport channels, although this is still useful if you want to, perhaps, watch a specific one-off sporting event.

The greatest disincentive for home cinema enthusiasts is that nothing is available in HD, and nor is surround sound offered.

The Now TV interface is clean and logical with options for Sports, Movies, My TV and Help listed along the top. Hover over Movies and you're presented with a set of sub-folders: Genres, Collections and Live TV (ie. the movie channels). Sleeve screen art, titles and ratings are presented in rows of 15 titles; scroll down to discover more genres or collections.

There's no save-for-later function but selecting and playing an on-demand movie adds it to your My TV folder, so to line something up ready you can simply play the first few seconds or so, which is arguably the only benefit of the platform's inability to restart playback where you left off.

Playback is a little on the slow side to start, with a tiresome 'obtaining licence to play' message appearing during buffering. The movie appears at its native resolution in a small window with darkened borders, with the option to select fullscreen. Audio is decent but image quality varies according to the original transfer with *The French Connection* too soft, blocky and noisy to bear on a 46in screen. *We Need To Talk About Kevin* is much more acceptable. Instability is a concern, with *Avengers Assemble* stuttering and even crashing.

Conclusion

Now TV is the new kid on the block and it shows, with limited ways to get it onto your flatscreen TV and only one current HD option. Now TV's price tag counts against it, too. However, in terms of new movie content it easily beats both LoveFilm and Netflix, and the forthcoming arrival of more live TV channels will make it even more tempting. Definitely one to keep an eye on.

Specifications

AVAILABLE ON: YouView boxes (except Live TV); HTC Desire mobiles; HTC Incredible; HTC Sensation; Samsung Galaxy S mobiles; Samsung Galaxy Note; iPhone 3GS, 4, 4S & 5; iPad and iPod Touch (4th gen or later); Xbox 360; Roku streamers; web browsers with Microsoft Silverlight
1080P VIDEO: No. 576p, except 720p on Xbox 360
5.1 AUDIO: No. stereo only
PRICING: £14.99 per month; £9.99 for a Sky Sports day pass
NUMBER OF TITLES: 300 (plus live access to 11 movie channels)
DOWNLOADABLE: No

Final standings

HIGH-SPEED INTERNET IS more affordable than ever and reliable enough to deliver stable, uninterrupted video streams in Full HD resolution with surround sound. Of course, that isn't always what you get with the current crop of VOD platforms – some are better than others. Choosing which you want will come down to price, device support and, of course, content – and you may even find that combining two or more is the best option...

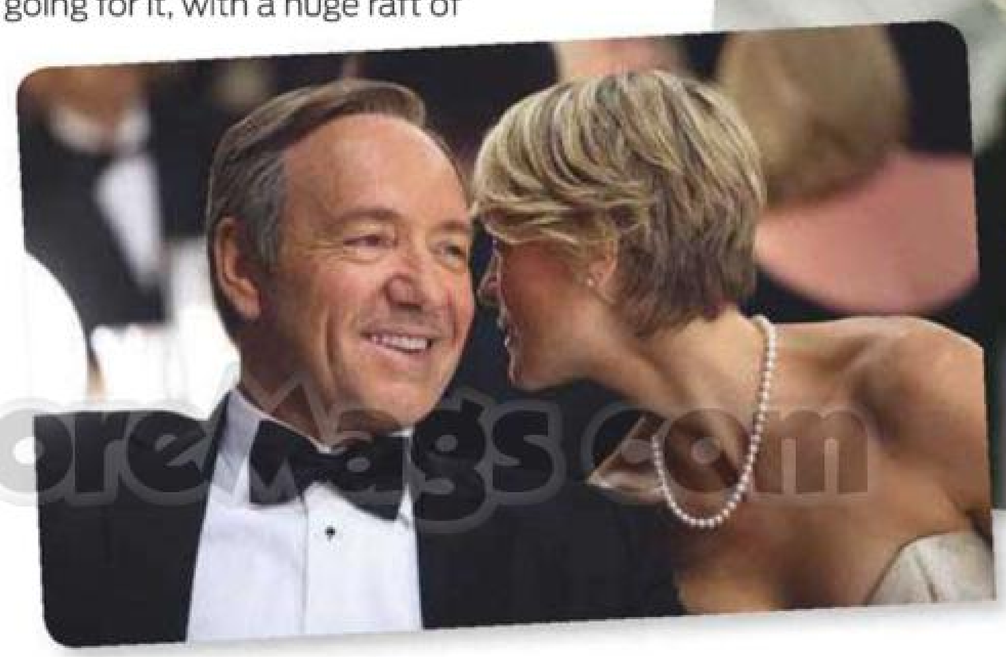
I was expecting better things from Acetrax but despite a decent website its poorly designed Smart TV apps had me pulling my much-needed hair out in frustration at its user experience, inability to update the account balance and mostly, refusal to play my rented titles. It takes last place here.

Now TV is an enticing prospect for anyone wishing to watch Sky's movie channels without a dish and it has some top-draw on-demand films. But Smart TV apps remain outside its ecosystem (although computer-to-screen workarounds are possible) and HD is not generally available. It's expensive, too, so today takes joint third spot. Hopefully it will improve as it matures.

Sitting next to Now TV, but a completely different proposition, is Blinkbox. This service has a lot going for it, with a huge raft of movies and TV titles available to rent and/or buy. Prices are reasonable, especially if you buy a whole TV series rather than individual episodes. Hardware support is good amongst Smart TVs but its Achilles' Heel is its instability and lack of HD content.

In second place is LoveFilm Instant. The Smart TV app can be annoying as it seems to be as much about disc rental management as streaming, but it has a huge range of content. More HD would be nice, though.

Netflix, therefore, is the current VOD champ. It's available on more devices, provides the most seamless experience and its movie and TV catalogue has just enough top titles to make it worth the £5.99 outlay. AV quality is consistently higher than the rest.





***House of Cards* is Netflix's first foray into original content – more will follow**

HCC VERDICT

Acetrax
→ From £1.49 (rent)/£6.99 (buy)
→ www.acetrax.com
HIGHS: Good variety of prices; decent selection of recent releases; user-friendly browsing; stable online playback
LOWS: Unreliable Smart TV app; no TV shows; complicated to set up; no games console support

Quality ★★★½☆
Content ★★★☆☆
Value ★★★☆☆
Overall ★★★☆☆

HCC VERDICT

Blinkbox
→ From £0.99 (rent)/£1.89 (buy)
→ www.blinkbox.com
HIGHS: Massive catalogue including lots of new releases and entire TV series; no minimum spend
LOWS: Can't download bought titles; no hi-def streams or 5.1 sound; search engine could be improved; limited hardware availability

Quality ★★☆☆☆
Content ★★★★☆
Value ★★★★☆
Overall ★★★½☆

HCC VERDICT

LoveFilm Instant
→ £4.99 per month
→ www.lovefilm.com
HIGHS: Huge back catalogue of older movies and TV shows; can use in conjunction with a disc rental package
LOWS: Incorrect aspect ratio sometimes used; unreliable search engine; judder and HD softness; no surround sound

Quality ★★★½☆
Content ★★★★☆
Value ★★★★☆
Overall ★★★★☆

HCC VERDICT

Netflix
→ £5.99 per month → www.netflix.com
HIGHS: Consistently good picture and sound quality; reliable and stable; original drama content; broad, multi-device integration
LOWS: Needs more film content, particularly new releases; user interface a bit baffling; can't watch content when offline

Quality ★★★★½
Content ★★★½☆
Value ★★★★☆
Overall ★★★★½

HCC VERDICT

Now TV
→ £14.99 per month
→ www.nowtv.com
HIGHS: Great selection of recent content; provides access to live Sky Movies channels; Sky Sports day pass is a handy option
LOWS: HD only on Xbox 360; no surround sound; no Smart TV apps; pricey; limited on-demand titles

Quality ★★★☆☆
Content ★★★★½
Value ★★★☆☆
Overall ★★★½☆

StoreMags.com



The wireless home cinema pioneer

The Sonos Playbar is a TV speaker that can be expanded into a full wireless home theatre system – at a price. **Steve May** reports

AV Info

PRODUCT:
High-end wireless soundbar, expandable to 3.1

POSITION:
Single speaker joins Play:3 and Play:5 wireless range

PEERS:
Bose Cinemate 1 SR; Yamaha YAS-101

HAVING EFFECTIVELY MODERNISED hi-fi, the wireless titan that is Sonos has set its sights on the booming soundbar business, and seemingly almost by default, finds itself a home cinema player, too. But can the brand really replicate its audio success in the world of TV and multichannel audio?

The Playbar soundbar is a substantial piece of kit. Running 90cm wide, it's clearly designed to partner larger displays, and can be mounted horizontally on a table or vertically on a wall. Design-wise it's decidedly macho, hiding a battery of drivers behind a dark fabric grille; aluminium trim adds a whiff of *eau du gadget*. Unlike the 'bar itself, connectivity is a little on the thin side, with just a pair of Ethernet jacks and a single optical digital audio input. What sets it apart from rival soundbars is the fact that it can be integrated within a broader multizone Sonos audio system, or expanded into a wireless home theatre system. Both options are enough to get the *HCC* team salivating.

To assess the Playbar as a multichannel component, we partnered it with a pair of diminutive Play:3 active speakers, used as left and right surrounds, and borrowed a Sonos SUB subwoofer, creating a 3.1 system. While the Play:3 enclosures are aesthetically an acquired taste, the subwoofer is drop-dead gorgeous, all black gloss and heft.

Setup simplified

Setting up this Sonos theatre is a rather different experience to wiring a conventional multichannel sub/sat package. For one thing, you'll (obviously) not need any speaker cable – if your living space is primarily bare boards you'll doubtless breathe a huge sigh of relief.

The installation proves a doddle. I plonked the Playbar onto my network via Ethernet, coupled it to a screen with the optical lead supplied, and then downloaded the Sonos Controller app, available for iOS or Android. There's no remote actually supplied with the 'bar itself, and the Controller is essential for setting up the system. The app allows you to wirelessly pair each of your enclosures – if only all systems were as easy to organise!

As a solo solution, the Playbar is immediately impressive. There's a depth and richness to its output which easily eclipses the natural squawking of the average flatscreen. It produces a veritable wall of sound that's broad and solid. The Playbar utilises nine drivers – six mid-woofers and three tweeters – two of which aim out from its edges to create the widest possible soundfield.

Each driver has its own digital amplifier. While it goes pretty loud, Sonos conceals the amount of welly available. 'You won't find rated output referenced anywhere, we prefer to let the sound speak for itself!', I was told.

Sonos' debut soundbar uses side-firing drivers to widen its soundstage

filmmagic.com



That's as may be. But it's worth noting that at full blast, the Playbar doesn't draw more than around 25W from the mains – and at this volume the output becomes shard-like and unpleasant.

In home theatre guise, the Playbar connects to the Play:3 satellites and SUB, using the 5GHz band (although it also offers 2.4GHz to pair with the brand's original Play:5 active speaker and Connect amplification).

In pursuit of ease of use, the system relies on the TV itself to act as a source selector, which could prove problematic for some. Sky+ HD boxes currently don't deliver multichannel sound over HDMI, so they can't route multichannel sound through any telly. You also

> 'As as solo solution, the Sonos Playbar is impressive – there's a depth and richness to its output'

need a TV able to extract 5.1 from a connected HDMI source and output it as DD5.1 over optical. Not all can do this. Your best guide is to look for overt Dolby Digital Plus compliancy on any TV you intend to use.

You can't partner the Playbar directly with a Blu-ray player, either. While the Playbar has a Dolby Digital decoder, it doesn't offer any DTS support. Given that most Blu-ray movies come with a DTS-HD Master Audio soundtrack, the system would spend most of its time mute. Of course, if you haven't yet made the jump to Blu-ray and still cherish DVD, you'll have more joy, as unlike BD, the majority of DVD movies feature a Dolby Digital soundtrack. Yet even then, the lack of DTS decoding leads to some nonsensical home cinema situations. When playing my DVD of The Beatles' *Yellow Submarine* straight into the 'bar, I could only groove to *Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds* in German or Italian, as the disc restricts its English multichannel mix to DTS.

An alternative approach that would favour Sky+ HD (and similar set-top box) users, is to run an optical output direct to the Playbar, giving unfettered Dolby Digital. The system springs into life when fed a 5.1 mix. Steerage and LFE prove deeply impressive. *Rise of the Planet of The Apes*, on Sky Movies HD, gives the system a fabulous opportunity to show off. The movie rocks some seriously deep bass, and the Sonos SUB doesn't falter on the big transients, plunging deep and often. As Caesar and his green-eyed troupe break free from captivity the system thumps like a Silverback.

Intriguing proposition

As a wireless soundbar, the Playbar is unquestionably intriguing, and streaming hipsters with existing Sonos hardware will find it easy to accommodate. It's a solid, if expensive, single-box solution – you can get soundbar/subwoofer combis for much less, but these don't usually offer app control, and none bring you Sonos' music portfolio, which adds Spotify, Napster, Tunein, Last.fm, Rdio and more to whatever you've got in your iTunes library. Put it another way: if you were considering buying a pair of Play:3s for a living room setup, you might prefer this more elegant-looking single enclosure, and using it as a soundbar for regular TV material. And you can add the superb Sonos SUB for another £600 if you wish to sample low-end delights.

However, as a multichannel home theatre solution it's harder to enthuse over, as both source and TV need to play ball. The overall cost of a 3.1 system, using the Play:3 speakers, also fast becomes onerous. If value and true surround sound versatility are what you're after, you're better off looking at a more traditional solution ■



On the menu



→ Control of the Playbar, as with its sibling hardware, is via the Sonos Controller app, both for portable devices and desktop PCs/Macs. It provides a brilliantly intuitive interface, making setup and content browsing a painless experience

Specifications

SONOS PLAYBAR

DRIVE UNITS: Six mid-range; three tweeters (size unspecified)
AMPLIFICATION: Not specified
CONNECTIONS: 2 x Ethernet; optical digital audio
DOLBY TRUEHD/DTS-HD MA: No
SEPARATE SUB: Not at this price – can be partnered with additional Sonos SUB
REMOTE CONTROL: No. Sonos Controller app (free) required
DIMENSIONS: 85(h) x 140(d) x 900(w)mm
WEIGHT: 5.4kg
FEATURES: Integrated 5GHz/2.4GHz wireless connectivity with SonosNet; Sonos Controller app for iOS and Android; variable orientation; can be used with existing Sonos system

HCC Verdict

Sonos Playbar

→ £600 Approx → www.sonos.com
→ Tel: 0808 234 6596

HIGHS: Easy wireless setup; big, bold audio quality; well-built; Sonos Controller app and music services are good fun

LOWS: Solitary optical input proves limiting; no DTS decoder onboard; multichannel package painfully expensive

Performance ★★★★☆
Design ★★★★☆
Features ★★★★☆
Overall ★★★★☆

Champion Boules

Cabasse has updated its best-selling Eole sub/sat speaker system, leaving Francophile **Ed Selley** suitably impressed







FRENCH MANUFACTURER CABASSE has been producing the Eole for some years and this is the latest revision. £1,000 buys you a single large box containing five identical satellites, a Santorin subwoofer and, handily, a pair of floorstands and 40m of speaker cable.

The satellites make use of Cabasse's experience in coaxial drivers and each one mounts a 4in mid/bass driver with a 1.1in soft dome tweeter. To prevent them rolling around, the satellites attach to a magnetic 'foot' that can be used as a shelf- or wall-mount, or a different 'foot' to attach them to the stand. This is clever and flexible, but has resulted in a fiddly speaker terminal arrangement. You have to jam an umbilical cable from the satellite and the cabling to your amp into the same teeny pair of terminals. Grr.

The areas that Cabasse is usually very proficient in are no exception in the Eole 3. The satellites have excellent cohesion between mid/bass and tweeter and avoid sounding like they are 'beaming' the sound to a particular sweet spot. The handover from speaker to speaker is seamless and each satellite will go impressively loud without sounding strained. More importantly, when you do ramp up your AVR while watching something with a bit of vigour – like the charmingly silly *Dredd 3D* – the Eole 3 sounds fun. It responds to the onscreen demands with real enthusiasm and drive. Bullets zing across the soundstage and while the Eole array retains an impressive sense of control and never tips over into harshness or brightness, it also manages to let go and raise a smile in a way its bigger brothers didn't.

The 200W subwoofer is an impressive piece of equipment, too. The crossover with the satellites is smooth and unobtrusive and it has the speed and agility to match them. The relatively high point of 150Hz means that the upper registers aren't quite as omni-directional as you might like, so the best results were gained with the sub placed at the front between the left and right speakers. When you do so, even two channel audio – often a bit of an Achilles' heel for sub/sat packages – sounds vibrant.

Overall, this is a well-built, flexible speaker setup, with excellent tonality and fire in its belly – easily worth the £1,000 ticket ■

Specifications

EOLE 3 SATELLITE
DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 1.1in soft dome tweeter; 1 x 4in mid/bass driver
ENCLOSURE: Sealed
FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 150Hz-22kHz
SENSITIVITY: 90dB
POWER HANDLING: 70W
DIMENSIONS: 130mm sphere
WEIGHT: 1.3kg

SANTORIN SUBWOOFER
DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 8.25in cellulose fibre cone
ENCLOSURE: Ported
FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 29Hz-150Hz
ON BOARD POWER: 200W
REMOTE CONTROL: No
DIMENSIONS: 350(h) x 330(w) x 330(d)mm
WEIGHT: 9.3kg
CONNECTIONS: Speaker level input and output; phono input

AV Info

PRODUCT: Designer 5.1 sub/sat speaker package

POSITION: Part of Cabasse's Lifestyle lineup, alongside the iO2 and Alcyone

PEERS: KEF E305; B&W M-1; Monitor Audio MASS

Action stations

I recently reviewed the Cabasse MT series in *HCC* and, while I felt it had many virtues, it was perhaps a bit laid back to be a true all-rounder. The Eole 3 is smaller and a lot cheaper, but in many ways proves a more enjoyable set of speakers to live with.

HCC Verdict

Cabasse Eole 3 5.1
→ £1,000 Approx → www.cabasse.com
HIGHS: Detailed, powerful and entertaining sound; excellent build quality
LOWS: Horrible speaker terminals; subwoofer placement needs care

Performance ★★★★★
Design ★★★★☆
Features ★★★½☆
Overall ★★★★½

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Storemags



STILL ROCKIN'
Need a good laugh? *30 Rock: Season 6* arrives on DVD p103

Samsung's style icon

The UE46F8000 is as good-looking as LED TVs get, but **Adrian Justins** believes there's a lot more to this flagship screen than its sultry design

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
46in Smart 3D LED TV

POSITION:
Samsung's highest specified 46in screen

PEERS:
Panasonic TX-L47WT65B; Sony KDL-46 W905A

OF SAMSUNG'S FORTY new screens unleashed so far for 2013, the UE46F8000 is the flagship 46in model. Bestowed with a raft of new measures designed to deliver the best TV pictures the company has ever mustered from an edge-lit LED screen, it also ups the ante in terms of Smart TV and multimedia interaction.

As well as its slim design, the Samsung also features an almost impossibly small bezel and a new 'Arc' stand that allows the screen to almost float when viewed in low light. It's a distinctive, chic look, but the stand requires a surface the full width of the TV, which means you'll need to think about your setup before you take the plunge.

Cosmetic changes are one thing, but there are more significant improvements to last year's E8000 series going on beneath the surface. For starters, the UE46F8000 utilises a quad core processor. This gives the screen the power to run multiple apps and for owners to move around its operating system faster than Usain Bolt running for a bus; more importantly, it also allows more complex picture processing algorithms, with particular relevance to backlighting control and Motion Plus judder and blur reduction.

TV with brains

The extra processing power, combined with the provision of secondary Freeview HD and Freesat HD tuners, provides the option to simultaneously watch one channel and record another to a USB-connected hard disk drive. Or you can mirror one channel or recording to a Samsung smartphone or tablet whilst watching something else on the TV.

And whilst the TV's audio is not the primary concern of *HCC* enthusiasts it's good to find that the built-in speaker performance has been boosted by the provision of two 10W subwoofers. This makes it adequate for non-critical viewing if you want to give your AVR the evening off.

The UE46F8000 does nothing to diminish Samsung's reputation for being at the vanguard of Smart TV development, improving on what was already a feature-packed system. My colleague John Archer has covered this aspect in greater depth (see p36) so I'll just say that the new five-screen Smart Hub interface is a neat idea, especially the App page and the useful TiVo-style recommendation engine.

> 'The Samsung's pictures are hugely satisfying, with superb contrast, brightness and colour fidelity'

Control hasn't been simplified, however. Rather, it's been diversified. There are now four means of operating the screen, including two remote controls. The traditional handset, which is a decent if rather dull affair, is complemented by a minimalist brushed aluminium job with trackpad and built-in microphone. The latter is for using the screen's voice control. Although better than last year's effort it remains unrefined. Maybe it's my Essex accent, but when I asked it to change source it displayed 'Change thoughts' onscreen, which is as helpful as an airbag on a bicycle. As for gesture control, I'll happily wave goodbye to that, although I can't see Samsung or any other brand giving up on the notion.

Using the primary remote, there are a lot of tweaking options available, despite the absence of ISF certification. Most parameters, such as gamma levels and noise reduction, allow you to see the effects of each setting before being selected or finalised.

Game on for LED

Performance across a range of sources shows that Samsung has upped its game for its top-line LED sets. Most obvious, when compared with previous models, is that clouding from the screen's illumination system has been significantly reduced, allowing you to choose a backlight setting that suits your room's own ambient lighting rather than having to reduce it to clear away the clouds. Also, local dimming control makes it possible to totally blacken the letterbox bars during 21:9 widescreen viewing without affecting the rest of the picture.

With or without the black bars, the Samsung's pictures are hugely satisfying, with contrast, brightness and colour fidelity reaping the benefits. Well-mastered Blu-rays come across punchy yet natural, and are a delight to watch. Skin-tones, I found, were particularly well-judged. At times the picture seems on a par with a top-notch plasma, albeit with the benefit of brightness in abundance.

If ever a movie needed a screen with excellent shadow detail it was *The Dark Knight Rises*. Here, the Blu-ray has incredible clarity even when Batman is lurking in the shadows of Gotham's unlit rooftops. And so effective is the screen at squeezing out every last drop of detail that excessively grainy material, such as *Argo*'s scenes in Tehran airport, may have you reducing its Sharpness setting.

Samsung's new screen also does a fiendishly good job with 3D material, almost eliminating crosstalk from the tortuous Golden Gate Bridge sequence in my venerable *Monsters vs Aliens* platter, and giving a fantastic sense of depth to Derek and his groomsmen at the church. The brand is persisting with Active 3D while much of the competition is adopting Passive, but at least it's making a good fist of it.

Motion processing has also been improved, with greater control available for tweaking blur, judder and drag. Artefacts seem less common but the higher settings still make filmic material look unnaturally like cheap video footage and should be completely avoided. Happily, the screen is a dab hand at fast-moving action anyway, its '1000Hz' processing helping to keep judder and blur at bay, while maintaining clarity and detail to a good degree. As such, the UE46F8000 is an excellent screen for watching sport, such as live Champions League footy on Sky HD. I cannot, however, recommend the new Sports mode, which is accessed from the Smart Features menu, and cranks up the brightness, adopts a weird stadium sound mode and launches a social media interface. The idea is that you interact with friends on Twitter or Facebook during a live event, but it's hard to imagine anything more annoying.



The UE46F8000 is super-thin – did you expect anything else?

Raising the bar

The price here is high for a 46in display, off-axis viewing causes contrast levels to take a nose-dive, and the very wide desktop stand could throw up some installation problems, but overall the UE46F8000 is a hugely rewarding screen to own and operate. And in terms of LED picture performance, it raises the bar very high indeed ■

On the menu



→ Away from the new five-screen Smart Hub (pictured), the adjustment menu system is largely unchanged from last year. The layout is easy on the eye and ultra-fast to navigate but some picture tools remain frustratingly buried in sub-menus

Specifications

3D: Yes. Active
FULL HD: Yes. 1,920 x 1,080
TUNER: 2 x Freeview HD; 2 x Freesat HD
CONNECTIONS: 4 x HDMI; 3 x USB; component video; composite video; RGB Scart; Ethernet; stereo audio; digital optical audio; headphones socket; IR control; CI slot
SOUND: 40W (4 x 10W)
BRIGHTNESS (CLAIMED): N/A
CONTRAST RATIO (CLAIMED): N/A
DIMENSIONS (OFF STAND): 1,032(w) x 600(h) x 35(d)mm
WEIGHT (OFF STAND): 12.8kg
FEATURES: Ultra Clear panel; 1,000Hz refresh rate (200Hz plus backlight scanning); Micro Dimming Ultimate; 3D HyperReal Engine; Mega Contrast; built-in Wi-Fi; USB multimedia playback (AVCHD, AVI, XVID, DIVX, MPG, MP4, MKV, MOV, WMV, M2TS, JPEG, BMP, PNG, FLAC, MP3, M4A); DLNA Allshare; Web browser; two pairs of 3D glasses; Arc design stand, Super Narrow Bezel; retractable camera; Skype; voice and gesture control; dual remotes; USB PVR recording; BD Wise; Wi-Fi direct; Advanced Sports Mode; Picture-in-Picture; Game mode

HCC Verdict

Samsung UE46F8000
→ £1,800 Approx → www.samsung.com/uk
→ Tel: 0870 2420 303
HIGHS: Superb HD pictures; refined backlighting control; slick Smart TV; stunning design
LOWS: Unreliable voice and gesture control; somewhat expensive; bizarre sports/social mode; wide desktop stand

Performance ★★★★★
Design ★★★★½
Features ★★★★½
Overall ★★★★★



Musically gifted

Yamaha's RX-A2020 marries a rugged build quality with a refined multichannel performance and a brilliant auto EQ system. **Richard Stevenson** finds it easily worth its price tag

AV Info

PRODUCT:
Nine-channel networked AV receiver

POSITION:
One down from the flagship RX-A3020

PEERS:
Denon AVR-3313; Pioneer SC-LX76; Arcam AVR-360

SITTING IN THE shadow of Yamaha's flagship Aventage receiver, the £1,500 RX-A2020 is a big and hefty lump of AVR goodness. The range build and cosmetics are superb, even if there is a serious hint of Harman Kardon about that full-width black Perspex screen, and the display is bold, bright and large enough to see from the other side of the room – even if you live in a sports hall. The rest of the fascia is pleasingly minimalistic and the sculptured knobs, different sizes at that, have a cool and solid feel to them.

Behind all this style and bling is a raft of Yamaha's latest design thinking, including a rigid chassis with the Aventage fifth foot and H-frame bracing, symmetrical amp layout and a host of Anti-Resonance Technologies (ART). It's a nicely manufactured receiver.

Goes all the way to 11

Connectivity is pretty good. As well as eight HDMI inputs and twin outputs, there are 11 sets of speaker terminals allowing you to hookup width, height or second-zone speakers and switch the amplifier outputs between them (although delivery of the first two is via Yamaha's proprietary DSP, rather than DTS Neo:X or Dolby Pro-Logic IIz).



The handset features an LCD display window to keep you informed

The remote is a large and chunky design with a flip-out bottom panel that exposes more buttons and makes the whole device rather unwieldy. Conversely, the setup mic is a shrunken version of the old one and now works better with true three-dimensional audio setups using height channels. Okay, there is no network switching or MHL HDMI input, as found on Denon's AVR-4520, but you would have to cobble together at least another £500 for that beast.

These omissions aside, the features count is right up there with the likes of Denon's AVR-3313 and Pioneer's SC-LX76. You get 4K scaling and HQV video chipsets, Airplay and DLNA compatibility, and even S-video connectivity, which has been ditched by most other AVR manufacturers. The 9 x 140W of power should have most speaker systems rocking with ease, and there is an 'eco' mode which claims to use 20 per cent less juice. Although why you would buy a 1,260W amplifier and then worry about electricity consumption is a mystery to us.

The setup process is super-smooth and the RX-A2020 popped up on my PC network as

soon as it was powered up. The GUI is not Yamaha's greatest asset, though. and is a little rough round the edges compared to the HD GUI competition. Text looks a bit chunky and pixelated, menu colours are muted and the loose mix of icons and menus is all a bit primary school reference book. Conversely, Yamaha's AV Controller app is crisp and colourful and makes the Denon/Marantz app look rather bland.

The auto setup procedure commences with the delightful message 'Please keep quiet or leave the room'. The editor often says the same thing in magazine meetings. Yet deserting the RX-A2020 while it does its thing isn't necessary as the YPAO optimiser has to

> 'Yamaha's RX-A2020 is a thriller straight off the bat, with a sound that's big, bold and energetic'

be the fastest setup of any AV receiver to date. Assuming you haven't cross-wired a speaker and remembered to switch on your sub, the whole process is done and dusted in about two minutes. The rest of the settings are accessed through the 'on-screen' and 'options' menus that pop up a GUI overlaying the input picture. As the menus are nearly fullscreen, the overlay is a bit pointless and the side and bottom scrolling icons are not exactly intuitive. On the plus side, there is a superb status display that details all your settings and signals, and a compressed music enhancer and Yamaha's user-defined SCENE modes.

Big, bold and energetic

Like most of the current crop of Yamaha AVRs, the RX-A2020 is a thriller straight off the bat. Its sound is big, bold and energetic with a sumptuous line in physical low-frequency effects. The YPAO EQ system works wonders and remains one of the subtlest EQ systems around. It soothes and injects life into the sound where some other systems can sound like they have been tuned by a hyperactive monkey with a graphic equaliser. My first music test disc, *Legends of Jazz* on Blu-ray, hits the room with a smooth and polished presentation that makes you want to wear a smoking jacket and call the music 'jaaaaaazzzz'. The top-end is sweet and fluid, with female vocals and dialogue free from sharp edges or extra sibilance.

Moving on to movie material, and the opening sequence in *Underworld Awakening* is delivered with huge wedges of power. However, I feel it could do with just a bit more sparkle and edge across high-frequency effects. On the other hand, the Yamaha's rather safe balance simply encourages you to go large with the volume knob – and there is plenty of power to back it up. Push your speakers hard and the sound comes at you with visceral impact.

So the RX-A2020 certainly won't have your teeth on edge or clear you ear wax with its smooth HF, yet I suspect it may be just a bit too laid back if your speakers have a naturally warm and sleepy demeanour. Thankfully, dialogue doesn't lose anything for this and Ms Beckinsale's voice is bold and well projected into the room.

With YPAO switched off the RX-A2020 gets even more laid back and looses a chunk of its infectious energy and scale, proving once again that the YPAO system is a clever tech. It keeps the Yamaha sounding tight and potent and, backed by those nine channels of power, really delivers movies with passion.

Efficient all-rounder

There's more to like about the RX-A2020, too. Music playback from my network proved über-slick and the compressed audio enhancer works wonders with ropey digital files. In that respect, the RX-A2020 is quite an efficient all-rounder for those who like their movies and music with a polished, refined sound. And be aware that you can probably find it for less that its £1,500 list price ■



More inputs than you're ever likely to need...

On the menu



➜ Hopefully Yamaha will gives the menus a refresh on the next generation of its AVRs, both in terms of visual appeal and a tweak to the layout – although they're not too hard to get your head around. The free Android and iOS app is more enticing

Specifications

DOLBY TRUEHD: Yes. And DD+
DTS-HD MASTER AUDIO: Yes
THX: No
MULTICHANNEL INPUT: Yes. 7 x phonos
MULTICHANNEL OUTPUT (CLAIMED): 9 x 140W
MULTIROOM: Yes. Three zones
HDMI: 8 x inputs; 2 x outputs
COMPONENT VIDEO: 4 x inputs; 1 x output
AV INPUTS: 5 x composite; 4 x S-video; 7 x digital audio (4 x optical and 3 x coaxial)
VIDEO UPSCALING: Yes. To 4K
DIMENSIONS: 435(w) x 467(d) x 192(h)mm
WEIGHT: 17.1kg
ALSO FEATURING: Rigid chassis construction; AirPlay; DLNA; USB iPod/iPhone/iPad input; HQV Vida processor; net radio; AV Controller app; SCENE macros; Ethernet port; adaptive DSP level; Eco mode; Presence modes; Dialogue Lift and Dialogue Level Adjustment; Ultra Low Jitter PLL circuitry; auto power down; Wi-Fi via additional adapter

HCC Verdict

Yamaha RX-A2020
➜ £1,500 Approx ➜ uk.yamaha/com
➜ Tel: 0844 811 1116
HIGHS: Great looks and build quality; potent and energetic sound; YPAO EQ works well; excellent MP3 music enhancer
LOWS: Perhaps a little too smooth sounding for its own good; user interface could be improved; no MHL HDMI input

Performance ★★★★½
Design ★★★★★
Features ★★★★½
Overall ★★★★½

storemags.com

Lounge lizard

Libratone's ultra-swish AirPlay-toting soundbar is clad in cashmere, and you'll need a lot of cash to buy one. But **Adrian Justins** reckons it might be worth the outlay



The solidly built Lounge is without doubt one of the biggest soundbars ever made, and with its Italian cashmere jacket, certainly one of the most surprisingly clad. While designed to make an impact thanks to its maximalist proportions, it has a minimalist approach to connectivity, with a solitary input (for optical or analogue line-in) complemented by AirPlay, Android and Windows wireless streaming. There is just one function button, which gently pulses various colours according to its status.



The Lounge can be bought in five colour options

The idea is to get the Lounge on to your wireless network, although it can create a direct Wi-Fi connection to AirPlay and DLNA compatible devices using PlayDirect in the absence of a network. Setting up and operating the Lounge using the free Libratone App, which gives you access to seven DSP modes, is a cinch.

The Lounge's performance certainly doesn't disappoint. It has energy in abundance and effortlessly filled my room with its well-imaged soundfield. The rehearsal scene in *Super 8* on Blu-ray – before the train crash – is a fine example of its excellent work. The wind howls yet every subtle detail is clear, from the rustling of paper and the buzzing fly to the creaking floorboards and the dialogue between Alice and Joe. Then, there's the rumble of the approaching train and the eventual impact. Here, the clanging metal and multiple explosions are delivered with intensity – low frequencies are tightly controlled and seamlessly blended with the lower mid-range. It's hard to believe there's no sub squirrelled away behind the TV, such is the power on offer.

The Lounge breezes through everyday TV viewing, brilliantly improving dialogue. Michael Jackson's *This Is It* Blu-ray, meanwhile, shows the 'bar's ability with music, allowing you to remember what an incredible voice Jacko had. Streaming music from an iPhone over AirPlay is equally impressive – some soundbars and speaker docks simply reveal the lack of detail in compressed music, which makes them tiring, but the Lounge finds warmth and clarity.

Wolf in sheep's clothing

For sure, the Libratone Lounge is pricey (£500 more than Sonos' PlayBar, see p58) but it's a delight to own and operate, and underneath its woolly coat is an electronic wolf with real bite. It sounds superb. No HDMI, though ■

AV Info

PRODUCT: High-end soundbar/ AirPlay speaker

POSITION: Above the Zip and Live in Libratone's audio product range

PEERS: Sonos PlayBar; Yamaha YSP 2200; Bose Cinemate 1 SR; B&W Panorama 2

Specifications

DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 8in bass driver; 2 x 4in ceramic midrange; 2 x 1in ribbon tweeters
AMPLIFICATION: 150W (1 x 50W woofer, plus 4 x 25W)
CONNECTIONS: 3.5mm audio mini-jack for analogue or optical digital sound
DOLBY TRUEHD/DTS-HD MA: No
SEPARATE SUB: No
REMOTE CONTROL: No
DIMENSIONS: 1,000(w) x 220(h) x 120(d)mm
WEIGHT: 12kg
FEATURES: Wall-mountable (bracket included); controllable using Libratone App for iOS, Android or Windows; AirPlay and DLNA PlayDirect audio streaming; 38Hz-20kHz claimed frequency range; FullRoom acoustic setting (Neutral, Floor, Wall, Shelf positioning); seven DSP modes (Neutral, Easy Listening, Soft and Comfortable, Rock; Jazz, Movie, Live Concert); adjustable LED brightness

HCC Verdict

Libratone Lounge
→ £1,100 Approx → www.libratone.com
HIGHS: Powerful, detailed sound; top-notch design; simple operation
LOWS: Expensive; sheer size may be awkward; no HDMI connectivity

Performance ★★★★★
Design ★★★★½
Features ★★☆☆☆
Overall ★★★★☆

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Record and conquer

John Archer auditions this neat gadget targeted at the joystick generation

FOR SOME HARDCORE gamers, winning isn't enough; posting videos online for all to see is the only way to satisfy their egos. If this sounds like you, then the Hauppauge HD PVR 2 Gaming Edition, a standalone PS3/Xbox/Wii video recorder, is right up your FPS alley.

The small, shapely HD PVR 2 is equipped with an HDMI throughput, plus an 'AV Input' slot (which includes HD component video support). Xbox users can loop their console through the HDMI, but unfortunately the PS3's encrypted HDMI output limits you to 1080i or lower recordings via component versus the Xbox's 1080p.

Introducing the HD PVR 2 between your console and screen brings no obvious lag, though video streams take a few seconds to appear in the supplied ArcSoft Showbiz software. This software can record in three different formats (and you can start recordings via a button on the device's top) and allows easy editing and uploading.



Recording quality is good. Xbox recordings from *Bioshock Infinite* and *Dishonoured* look the best, with rich colours, HD detailing, excellent motion fluidity and reasonably few compression artefacts. PS3 videos look less rich and detailed, but you can always clearly see what's happening.

The HD PVR 2 we tested only supports stereo audio, though a new Plus edition enables 5.1 channels.

The lack of PS3 HDMI support is unfortunate if hardly Hauppauge's fault, and £120 seems slightly expensive for such a single-minded device. But the HD PVR 2 undeniably does what it says on the tin, and it does it slightly better than expected ■

Want to archive your frag-fests? Get this

HCC VERDICT

Hauppauge HD PVR 2 Gaming Edition → £120

Overall ★★★★☆

RDIO → From £4.99 per month (subscription)

A million love songs later

There's a new music streaming service in town to rival Spotify. **Mark Craven** hunts for AC/DC

IT'S HARD TO find an AVR these days that doesn't feature the Spotify music-on-demand platform. Yet it has its rivals, notably Deezer and, in the UK as of this year, Rdio.

The latter is the brainchild of Skype founders Niklas Zennström and Janus Friis, and is based around two payment models. A £4.99 per month subscription gives you unlimited web access to a library of apparently 18million songs (I haven't counted). Stepping up to £9.99 per month allows streaming via mobile devices, (including syncing for offline use), Sonos and Roku hardware. Unlike Spotify, there's no free, ad-supported option, although there's a generous six-month trial for the web access model, and no download is required.

Rdio's strong points include its immaculate user interface, which puts the desktop Spotify GUI to shame with its clean, logical layout. Creating playlists, shuffling tracks and browsing is a pleasure.

Those with a penchant for rock will find the lack of Led Zeppelin, AC/DC and The Beatles annoying. However, Spotify doesn't claim these either (but does have Metallica's back catalogue, which Rdio doesn't). Sound quality is passable. Rdio doesn't state what bitrate is used – just 'CD-quality' – but for everyday listening I have no complaints.

I got Rdio onto my surround system via my Roku LT player. The UI is less accomplished, but if an improved version arrives on more hardware, you should at least check it out ■



HCC VERDICT

Rdio → From £4.99 per month (subs)

Overall ★★★★☆

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Accessorize me!
Headphones

A good pair of headphones can make late-night listening a whole lot easier. **Ed Selley** rounds up four prime contenders for a head-to-head – literally...

IN A PERFECT world, there would be no need for us to employ headphones for AV use. Children would sleep through anything, your partner would be just as keen on the same films watched at the same volume as you, and you'd be separated from your neighbour by a bit of open space – Lincolnshire, for example. Sadly, this utopian vision of home entertainment is just that, and a good pair of headphones can allow you to keep using your system when speakers aren't suitable.

The headphone market has exploded in recent years and buyers have a wider choice of models and styles than ever before. Full-size designs – in-ears just aren't up to the job – are available from £30 and upwards, but, naturally, you will find some performance compromises at this level.

> 'A good pair of headphones can allow you to keep using your system when speakers aren't suitable'

The four models auditioned here are priced between £180 and £400, but after a bit of careful hunting around you may find them with different, more appetising tickets.

Two sides to every story

The roundup has two conventional home headphones going up against two 'hybrid' designs intended to be as happy in your living room as they are on the pavement. A Cambridge Audio 551R AV receiver, copies of *Unstoppable* and *J. Edgar* on Blu-ray, and some high-resolution FLAC music files were used to separate the men from the boys...

Approx £200 → uk.akg.com

AKG K550

A stylish piece of design with some likeable sonic traits

AKG HAILS FROM Austria and its extensive range of headphones covers both the domestic and professional categories. The K550s are relatively inexpensive by the standards of some of the models in the brand's stable, and are a classic closed-back home set, which guarantees minimal noise leakage in use. These are a big pair of cans, but the very minimalist design and high-quality materials used in the construction means that they look and feel extremely smart. They aren't especially light at 305g, but the weight is well distributed and they prove very comfortable to wear for long periods.

For a closed-back design the AKGs manage to sound impressively spacious and open. The train-related mayhem of *Unstoppable* is presented with an expansive soundstage that means that the frequent bouts of locomotive action are given the sense of scale they need to be convincing. The effect is slightly undermined by the headphones' bass response, though – the bass that is there is detailed and extremely agile but when things start exploding, it doesn't have the depth of some of the competition.

Where the K550s are much more assured is with dialogue, which is clear, natural and convincing. With the more chat-driven *J. Edgar*, this £200 offering shows real assurance and class. Everything on screen is easy to follow, and the 'phones manage to find small details that add a sense of realism to the period drama. Music is also something that's handled deftly, with the same clean and spacious midrange giving tracks solid appeal. Once again, the slightly restrained bass response means that these can lack the energy of some rivals, but for refined late-night listening, this is a very impressive pair of headphones that does a great many things very well.



AKG's model is comfortable to wear over long periods

HCC VERDICT

AKG K550 → £200

Overall ★★★★½

Denon AH-D7100

The Japanese brand goes after the 'Music Maniac'...

THESE DENON HEADPHONES had an original launch price of £1,000, but a check online suggests that they can now be found for a much more affordable price. Part of the intriguingly named 'Music Maniac' line of headphones, the AH-D7100s are designed to work both on the move and at home. To this end Denon supplies two cords in the box – a short one for use out and about and a longer one for AVR hookup.

The AH-D7100s are a closed-back design and feel a little loose and heavy on the head. I'm not completely sold on the looks, but they are unobtrusive and build is commendable.

These headphones put in a good and impressively even-handed performance that will raise a smile. The mayhem of *Unstoppable* is well handled and there is enough attack and heft to the performance to convince you that Tony Scott's trains really are colliding with each other. The soundstage has a reasonable sense of space but the AH-D7100s don't have quite the same ability to resolve fine detail as some of the competition, and dialogue is occasionally slightly subdued. As a result, *J. Edgar* sounded a little muddled in parts, although never so much that it was hard to follow the action.

Denon's can are a hybrid, closed-back design

Musically, the AH-D7100s are smooth, controlled and usually enjoyable. There is a pleasing balance to the performance that doesn't favour any part of the frequency spectrum, and the result is pleasant to listen to – although, again, there is a sense that some finer details are lost in the mix. As a hybrid design, the Denons show much of the same traits on the move, but the slightly loose fit does limit some of the activities you might want to try with them with. Nonetheless, this is a well thought-out product that is impressively flexible.



HCC VERDICT

Denon AH-D7100 → £400

Overall ★★★★☆

Approx £220 → www.psbspeakers.com

PSB M4U1

PSB's all-rounder manages to get an awful lot right

PSB IS BETTER known as a manufacturer of loudspeakers but launched the noise-cancelling M4U2s to positive acclaim last year. The M4U1s are the same basic design, yet without the noise-cancelling, so come in at a lower price. Like the Denon model, this is another hybrid design that's aimed at both home and travel use and is supplied with a pair of cords. The PSBs also fold up and can be stored in a zipup case. The red finish I reviewed is a bit sudden, but they are also available in black. Build quality is good, as is comfort.

While another closed-back design, the PSBs manage to sound impressively big and spacious with movie material. The soundstage gives both action and dialogue enough room to appear convincing. Bass response is also pretty substantial, which gives hi-octane sequences some useful bite and attack. If I'm being very critical, effect panning from ear to ear seems not as good as some of the other models here, but the excellent detail retrieval and genuinely impressive dialogue more than make up for this. The experience of using the PSBs for Blu-rays is convincing enough to forget that you are listening to a pair of headphones – which is surely the point of the exercise.

If anything, the performance with music is even more impressive. The M4U1s have a timing and agility that only the AKG K550s can really compete with, and the PSB headphones respond by offering deeper bass from the same material. The final ribbon to an already solid bow is that these headphones can offer all of this exceptional performance on the move – this is by far and away the most portable design here.

This might only be the second pair of headphones PSB has ever made, but they seem to have quite a knack for it...



Don't like the red finish? Don't panic – you can also get the M4U1s in black

HCC VERDICT

PSB M4U1 → £220

Overall ★★★★★

Storemags.com

Sennheiser HD598

Behind the Zapp Brannigan finish, this is a capable set of cans



Cream, walnut and velour – not quite our cup of tea

PART OF HEADPHONE behemoth Sennheiser's vast range of in-ear and over-ear models, the HD598s are the only open-backed design in our roundup, which means that anyone in the same room as you is going to get a miniaturised version of whatever you are listening to. The finish of the HD598s is certainly 'unique', with the cream body accented by walnut inlays and brown velour earpads. Quite who the target market is for this is unclear, but at least the HD598s are comfortable and well-built. This is the only model here with a fixed quarter-inch jack, although a reverse adaptor is supplied.

If you are hunting for a pair of headphones solely for use with film soundtracks, the Sennheisers have some party pieces that will take some beating. None of the other pairs can come close to the bass response of the HD598s and when the trains in *Unstoppable* demolish bits of scenery, you can feel it as much as hear it. The open-backed design means that the soundstage is wide, open and convincing and the movement of effects from left to right is believable, too. Dialogue is also strong and this makes the HD598s a capable partner for the slightly more cerebral *J. Edgar*. When action is at its most explosive, dialogue can occasionally suffer – but not too seriously.

The effect of this huge low-end with music is more of a mixed bag. The Sennheisers are capable of producing analogue bass with impressive consistency but anything with a more pronounced low end can come through a little uncontrolled, and the raucous bass tends to dominate the performance to the detriment of the upper registers. But, when you also consider that the HD598s can only really be used at home and noise leakage is considerable, this is quite a specialised product. Maybe music just isn't its thing.

HCC VERDICT

Sennheiser HD598 → £190

Overall ★★★★☆

Final standings

ALL FOUR OF these headphones have some impressive attributes that mean none of them should be dismissed out of hand, but top of the pile are the **PSB M4U1s**. These offer all-round excellence, working equally well with movie and music material. They're comfortable, too, and feature the most portable design, should you want to take them with you. And you might even like the red colour scheme...



Coming second place are the **AKG K550s**. These are extremely comfortable to wear, handsome to look at and well-built. More importantly, they offer a sound quality that is clear, spacious and very easy to listen to for long periods, so ideal for movie watching. It's only the slightly limited bass response that counts against them.

Denon's **AH-D7100s** are a much more balanced all-rounder and feature excellent build and a smooth, controlled sound. However, the slight loss of fine detail, the relatively loose fitment and higher list price mean that they are bettered here.

The **Sennheiser HD598s** are an interesting proposition. Performance-wise, they're easily the most exciting set for action films in this roundup thanks to an impressive bass response, and are comfortable to wear for hours on end. However, the noise leakage from the open-backed design is very high and could be the cause of domestic warfare, and the performance with music (to say nothing of the interesting finish) are drawbacks.



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Digital Copy

Consumers want TVs that are ultra-thin, but **Mark Craven** would rather have more pixels than fewer millimetres. So where does that leave current OLED technology?

FOR THE LAST few years, flatscreen TVs have been getting thinner. Some are now so thin that it's remarkable the necessary electronics have been actually incorporated, and ship with special adaptors to hookup old-fashioned chunky cables.

This is all fabulous in my opinion. I remember living with a CRT TV that was almost as deep as it was wide, and ugly as hell. It was heavy, too: I once got a parking ticket during the time it took me to shunt it down three flights of stairs. My TV now is svelte and stylish and allows me to have other stuff in my viewing room. Like chairs, for instance.

However, I do think we're arriving at the point where ultra-thin TVs have become about as ultra-thin as they need to be. With the measurements down to mere millimetres, it's surely time for the engineers to pat each other on the back and move onto something more pressing. Motion handling, voice-controlled menu systems, the way screens attach to their stands – all these could do with a bit of a fettling for a start.

The OLED camp, though, thinks there's work still to be done, and that the current crop of standard LED-lit sets, like Samsung's F8000 series (see p62) are fat and unattractive. LG's finally-on-sale 55EM970V OLED telly is, as the company repeatedly tells us, only 4.5mm deep. Side-on, it's astonishing to look at. Front-on, so is the price tag...

Pixels per pound

You'll need £10,000 to purchase LG's sumptuous OLED model. This is, of course, beyond the budgets of many, but this isn't a product with 'many' in mind. I don't have a problem with expensive AV hardware – given the chance, I'd replace my integrated AV receiver with monstrous separates faster than you can say 'milled aluminium chassis' – but the LG looks somewhat pricey even by premium standards. After all, it is only a 55in screen. And it is only Full HD. And to me, this is the high-end deal breaker.

While we've waited long and lustily for OLED screens to arrive they've been trumped by something else – more pixels. Ultra Hi-Def screens are soon to be abundant, in a variety of sizes from a range of brands.

Comparing UHD and OLED pricing is a bit tricky, as, at the time of writing, there's little info to go on. LG's first-gen UHD set retails for around £22,000, but it's an 84in beast. Smaller sets, from LG, Toshiba and Sony, will cost less, with the latter already announcing a $5k price in the US for its 55in offering (see p12).

And even if you ignore price, I still personally think a UHD set looks like the better option. OLED's potential benefits are numerous, including super-fast response times, wide viewing angles and excellent contrast courtesy of its self-emmisive nature, but **I'm a detail junkie, and the lure of a native resolution of 3,840 x 2,160 pixels is too hard to ignore**. I'd hope many punters would feel the same, if they can get around the fact that LED-lit UHD sets aren't as mind-bogglingly thin.

It would be wrong for me to dismiss the 55EM970V before we've had a chance to test it, and I'm certainly excited by OLED technology. But in the make-believe world where I'm surrounded by multiple power amps and sleep on a pile of cash, I'm putting a UHD set in the viewing room and keeping LG's next-gen display as a bedroom telly. Until an Ultra HD OLED model arrives... ■

Are you more excited about OLED or Ultra HD? Let us know: email letters@homecinemachoice.com



Mark Craven's love of slim-line televisions doesn't equate to a love of slim-line BD decks. Having bought an AV rack with plenty of space, he wants to use it

stereonet



Film Fanatic

If movie studios would release films simultaneously around the globe, piracy would be less prevalent. That's the idea, anyway – but **Anton van Beek** can't see it happening

THE PAST FEW months have seen the closure of several high-profile file-sharing websites, much to the chagrin of those who continue to endorse copyright theft. And, once again, vocal piracy apologists were quick to pounce on the nearest internet news piece to add their own comments about how these criminal activities were actually the fault of the movie industry itself.

One of the arguments I keep encountering is that the reason so many 'normal' people turn to illegal downloads is because the film that they want to see has already opened in other countries, but has yet to be released where they live. The obvious solution, so it is claimed, is for the studios to adopt a policy of simultaneous worldwide releases. This way they wouldn't be 'forced' to turn to illegal downloads while the mean old movie studios keep them waiting.

This may seem like a pretty reasonable idea. But as soon as you start giving it any serious thought, the concept completely falls apart.

Promote or die

For the most part, those of us who read film magazines or visit movie sites will have pored over enough material to have made a decision about whether or not we're going to see a particular flick months before it's actually released. But this isn't true of the vast majority of potential cinemagoers. When you're talking about expecting to make hundreds of millions of dollars at the box office, you have to engage with the mainstream – and to do that you need to get your movie and its stars splashed all over the newspapers and TV.

This is where the premiere and press tour come into the equation. A new trailer released online is one thing – but it's nothing compared to the amount of mainstream awareness your film will get from tabloid coverage of **Tom Cruise spending 18 hours signing autographs and recording phone messages for anyone in the vicinity of Leicester Square**, or Scarlett Johansson discussing her love life while promoting your movie in some puff-piece for a glossy mag. Take away the chance to stagger international premieres and press tours and you can say goodbye to mainstream press coverage on an international level. Tom Cruise can only be in one place at once, after all.

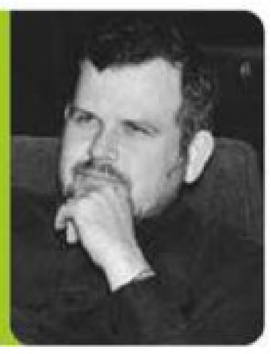
(And speaking of international concerns – doesn't the idea of simultaneous global cinema releases mean that all films will have to be delayed until after subtitles and dubs can be prepared for all languages in each territory?).

It's also worth remembering that there are plenty of countries outside of the US with thriving national film industries – even though only a small slice of their output ever makes it to these shores. If you start mandating worldwide day-and-date releases for all films, then who is actually going to handle the international distribution of these movies? Not to mention finding all of the extra screen space that would be needed?

But of course, most of the people advocating this day-and-date utopia don't care about the rest of the world. They just want Hollywood blockbusters to be released at the same time in all English-speaking countries. It's a blinkered and selfish point of view, although I really shouldn't be surprised. Anybody capable of justifying theft because they don't have the patience to wait a couple of weeks to watch a film has probably got a screw loose ■

What do you think about simultaneous global release dates? Let us know: email letters@homecinemachoice.com

Anton van Beek also has some strong views on worldwide simultaneous Blu-ray and DVD releases – but he's saving that rant for another day...



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Feedback

Got an axe to grind? Need to comment on current technology? Want to share your knowledge with our readers? **HCC** is here to help

I love HD DVD!

In response to Jono's e-mail, published in the last issue, I still use my HD DVD player, and you can even buy the discs for £1!

There are great bargains out there – much cheaper than Blu-ray, for the same quality. Incidentally, I do have a Blu-ray player and a DVD player on my rack. I wonder how many people still use their £2,500 top-end DVD decks? Mine is a second-hand Denon DVD A1 – it's never put a foot wrong in the 10 years or so that I've had it!

Eddie, Farnborough

Mark Craven replies: Glad you're still getting use from an HD DVD deck. £1 a disc is, indeed, a bargain, but surely you've snapped up every title released by now?

As for the previous generation of ultra high-end DVD players, most of Team HCC now resorts to using a BD player for all disc duties – and I'm pretty certain Richard Stevenson had to sell his flagship Denon deck to fund the purchase of yet another power amp. But if any readers are still employing a dedicated DVD deck in their setup, please get in touch and tell us why!



High-end DVD players – gone and forgotten?

Judging Dredd 3D

I enjoyed Anton van Beek's review of *Dredd 3D* and share his disappointment at the lack of extras on the Blu-ray. I'm no fan of 3D at all but if it has to be then *Dredd 3D* is one of the best of its kind. I've also seen it in 2D (in-flight entertainment on Emirates), and the film holds up just as well. Personally, I think the decision to release it overwhelmingly in 3D, with the concomitant higher price, played a major factor in its box office under-performance – as well as the lack of a headline star and also, given, financial restrictions, the lack of the massive marketing push needed to launch a film

★ Star letter... Still using LaserDisc? Yes, certainly!

Mark Craven asks if anyone is still using their LaserDisc player. I can proudly say that I am.

A LaserDisc player was the first of the disc types I moved onto after Super 8. I doggedly stuck with Super 8 because I felt sad that the whole system of home cinema would fall apart if the celluloid format disappeared. I had purchased one or two projectors in my time, finishing with what I considered to be the Rolls Royce of projectors, the French Beaulieu stereo with a 2,000ft spool (the first projector I owned was a Pathéscope 9.5 purchased by my dad for me close on 70 years ago when I was 10 years of age).

Eventually, however, I gave away/sold all of my Super 8 equipment and films and purchased a LaserDisc player – not a DVD player – together with LaserDiscs from eBay which were quite cheap.

The LaserDisc player I have is a Pioneer, which can play AC3 discs. They are all in my attic cinema with my Marantz 1601 AVR, Oppo BDP-105 Blu-ray player and my newly acquired Q Acoustics speakers. I always considered LaserDiscs to have excellent picture and sound and I still get a lot of pleasure out of them; my library contains such a lot of excellent titles, they are part of my home cinema history.

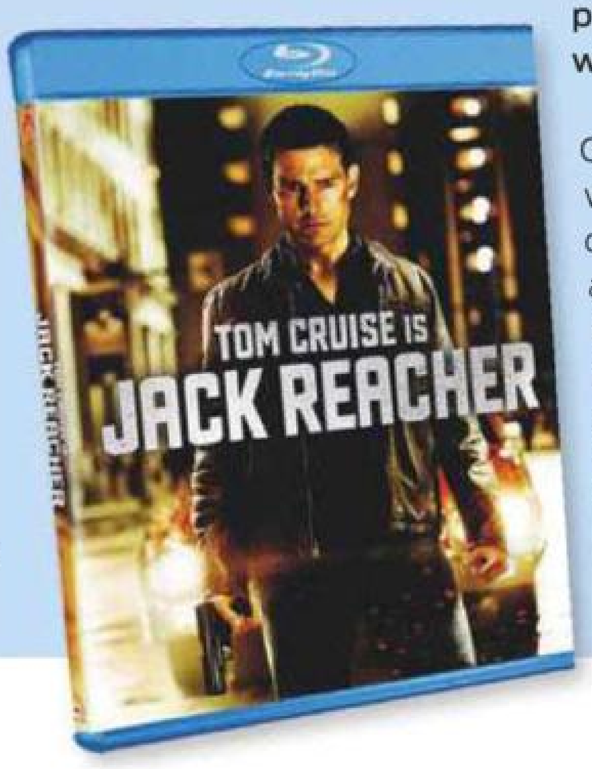
One question I always ask of myself: why can't some of our colleagues just sit back and enjoy music/films on the vast array of excellent machines that are with us today, instead of highlighting minor deficiencies?

William Haydock, via email

Mark Craven replies: We knew the mention of LaserDisc would draw a response – for some reason, it's the format that many AV fans look back on most fondly. Was it just the sheer size of the discs and the frequently gorgeous cover art?

As for a Pathéscope 9.5, I'd love to say 'that takes me back a bit' but I'd be lying – I wasn't born when these wonders were around! Maybe we should do a head-to-head with a SIM2 3DS...

Your last point is very interesting. AV enthusiasts are not all cut from the same cloth. There are those who aren't particularly interested in the technology, only in the movies it lets them watch. Others are more enticed by the silicon itself and eager to experiment with, tweak and, yes, criticise it – perhaps they should be forced to live with a 9.5mm projector to realise just how good we have it in 2013.



Our star letter-writer William wins a copy of *Jack Reacher* on Blu-ray courtesy of our pals at Paramount Home Entertainment. The Tom Cruise actioner, adapted from the best-selling series of novels, blasted its way onto Blu-ray Triple Play (Blu-ray, DVD and Digital Copy), DVD and Digital Download on 22 April.

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Dredd 3D: the Blu-ray release could have done with more extras!

these days. Finally, lack of brand recognition helped seal its fate in North America.

The Stallone version is a bit of a stinker, especially to those of us who grew up with Dredd and *2000 AD*, but is still an enjoyable enough romp, given what Hollywood can and does do to such national treasures. This new version makes not so much money, in film terms, go a very long way, but it would have been great if they' had more so as to make it properly sci-fi – and not South Africa, as in the opening sequences!

Would I buy the Blu-ray? Not without a major price cut. I love extras – good ones – and here they have been too sloppy. Interviews can be runned and gunned on set and, from what you write, they could have done more; to leave out the important stuff is inexcusable (I'm guessing a lack of budget and laziness/arrogance – 'Hey! The fans'll buy this no matter what!' is responsible). I'd love to hope there will be a sequel but the way the business works the film is more likely to end up in the red. Sad, that.

Simon, via email

Anton van Beek replies: Thanks for the letter, Simon. Are you sure the Stallone Dredd outing wasn't a total 'stinker'? The only bit we remember is the scene in the exhaust vent where the fireball goes in the wrong direction...

Trigger happy

After reading Richard Stevenson's *Point of View* column in *HCC* #216 I felt I had to point out that when he mentioned schoolboy filmmaking errors in *Skyfall* – pointing out that Bond's father's hunting rifle was in fact a shotgun – it was in fact him that was making the error!

When it comes to big-game hunting, premium firearm manufacturers like Holland & Holland produce what are known as double rifles – i.e. they have two barrels side-by-side that are both zeroed-in to the same point. When hunting dangerous game this allows a very fast second shot. If you know anything about firearms, one look at Bond's gun will tell you it's not a shotgun but a double rifle. If you don't know anything about firearms it's probably better not to comment and make yourself look foolish!

Mark Warren, via email

Mark Craven replies: Thanks Mark. We're currently trying to work out which hunting rifle we should beat Richard over the head with.

And it obviously makes sense for Bond's old man to have a big-game hunting rifle in Scotland. You wouldn't want to tackle the Loch Ness Monster with an air rifle.

Still talking about Apple

I have read with interest the letters about the possibilities of an Apple television.

I feel that there is a point to be made here about anything Apple produces for the home cinema market.

I am neither for nor against any product that Apple currently produces or is going to produce in the future. However, if Apple does produce a TV, it should still be considered a means to an end.

What I'm trying to say is that ultimately, it is the film or TV series that you watch that comes first. I have consistently made the point that if a film fails, it is because it lacks something, be it plot, acting or sheer enjoyability.

The purpose of a home cinema is to forget you have it! After all, the film should be engrossing enough to forget the Smart apps your TV may have or how many speakers you have placed around the room.

Of course, when buying AV kit, I want to get the best that I can afford, but only to enhance the viewing experience. In the end it doesn't matter whether you spend £20,000 or £500, you spend it to watch films not to watch your hardware!

To this end, any TV that Apple makes can have all the gizmos you can think of, but if it doesn't produce a good picture on the screen, it's failed in its purpose. As with any screen, it should be transparent and therefore 'invisible'.

I am sure there are many people who buy the latest iteration of the iPhone or the iPad who will be ready to fork out a small fortune to own an iTV or whatever it's going to be called, but the true die-hard AV enthusiast will probably go straight to your review to check out how it performs rather than worry about what it does or doesn't do. After all, an iPhone is just a mobile phone with extras, therefore any Apple television should be just a TV with extras.

Steve Old, via email

Do I wait to upgrade?

Hi, I own an Optoma ThemeScene HD81 projector, bought new five years ago. I'm now thinking of upgrading to a JVC DLA-X55, with e-Shift, but my worry is that this is a stop-gap for real 4K projectors, and that these may appear at the same price point in the next year or so.

Is it therefore worth sticking with my Optoma HD81 for a little longer? Will we actually have 4K discs in the next year or so to play on 4K PJs?

If I do spend £5,000 on a JVC DLA-X55, I would like to get at least five years out of it before I upgrade again!

Contact us...

Write to HCC, AV Tech Media Ltd, Hadlow House, 9 High Street, Green Street Green, Orpington, BR6 6BG, or email us at letters@homecinemachoice.com

Please note: we cannot guarantee to print/answer all the letters we receive. Sorry.

Please help, I really don't know what to do!
M. Sahota, via email

John Archer replies: First, congratulations on identifying in your letter most of the biggest current questions in the home cinema world!

Genuine 4K/Ultra HD – as opposed to the JVC X55's e-shift 4K creation – certainly looks like being the Next Big Thing, even pushing OLED into the background. All the main brands are falling over themselves to get a slice of the perceived 4K action, and we're already seeing serious price erosion with native 4k televisions.

This might happen with projectors, too – although it's much harder to make a 4K projection chip than it is a 4K TV screen due to the physical smallness of the chipsets. Still, Sony has already done it with the VPL-VW1000ES, and JVC has done it with commercial projectors. So I can certainly see



a price-eroding 4k projector battle between at least JVC and Sony breaking out in considerably less than the five years you want your next projector to last for. Such a battle would almost certainly see prices fall from the Sony's current £17,000 level.

Regarding 4K sources, we just don't know what's going to happen yet. Streaming doesn't seem a likely 4K solution right now, but Blu-ray and broadcasts are definitely interesting – especially given the efforts currently going into developing new high-compression, hi-resolution codecs.

With so many uncertainties right now, though, you might be best advised to stick with your HD81 a bit longer – perhaps up to the IFA technology show in September (and the US CEDIA Expo), by which time the roadmap concerning content, and hardware pricing trajectories,

Sony's £17k VPL-VW1000ES is the most affordable 4K projector around

will have become much clearer. That said, our most optimistic guess would suggest that it will be two, or more likely three, years before a native 4K projector gets near the X55's £5,000 price. So you could always look on the X55 as an awesome way to kill four or five years before 4K goes mainstream ■

Win! Three great Blu-rays up for grabs

Just email your answer to Competitions@homecinemachoice.com to be in with a chance



Scanners

David Cronenberg's exploding-head filled 1981 sci-fi horror about telekinetic mutants has recently been given a mind-blowing (pardon the pun) UK Blu-ray release by Second Sight – and they've generously handed over five copies for us to give away.

Question:
David Cronenberg also directed which Stephen King adaptation?
Answer:
A) The Shawshank Redemption **B)** Misery
C) The Dead Zone
Email your answer to the above address with ***'Scanners'*** *as the subject heading*



Django Unchained

Quentin Tarantino returns to your cinema room on May 20 with Sony Pictures' Blu-ray release. The award-winning Western stars Jamie Foxx as the titular hero, aided by Christoph Waltz's bounty hunter as he takes revenge on nasty slave owner Calvin Candie (Leonardo DiCaprio). We have five BDs to dish out.

Question:
Jamie Foxx also starred in...
Answer:
A) Miami Vice **B)** Bad Boys
C) Beverly Hills Cop
Email your answer to the above address with ***'Django'*** *as the subject heading*



True Blood: The Complete Fifth Season

Courtesy of HBO Home Entertainment we have three copies of the Blu-ray box set of *True Blood: The Complete Fifth Season* (available to buy from May 20) to give away. If you like your TV programmes to have a bit of bite, then you can't afford to miss out...

Question:
Which of these is also an HBO show?
Answer:
A) The Sopranos **B)** Breaking Bad
C) Battlestar Galactica
Email your answer to the above address with ***'True Blood'*** *as the subject heading*

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Certified: AV-Holic!



As an owner of one of Philips' 21:9 ratio LED TVs, AV-Holic **Matt Bridger** is a rare breed – here he shares his thoughts on CinemaScope 3D, Pioneer AVRs and *Casino Royale*



Matt is hoping for an 'upgrade-free' 2013

Introduce yourself...

I'm Matt Bridger, aged 45, working as an Audit Manager. I've been into home cinema since around the late 1990s.

What hardware do you have in your current system?

A Philips 58PFL9955H 21:9 3DTV, a Pioneer SC-2022 receiver and an Oppo BDP-103 Blu-ray player (multiregion). The speakers are all from the Monitor Audio Silver range, running in 5.1.

So you've got a 21:9 TV? What do you think of it?

As I have a dedicated room for movie-viewing I thought a 21:9 TV would be ideal. When Philips brought out a 3D model in 2010 it became a 'must buy'. The picture quality for the best Blu-rays is stunning. Some of the lower quality discs produce 'Dynamic Backlight' flickering issues, although this can be eliminated by switching the setting off and living with the reduced black level quality. I have found the 3D on this set to be excellent despite some negative comments on various forums. This is providing you allow the TV to warm up for an hour or so prior to watching a 3D movie – this virtually eliminates any cross-talk. Watching 3D movies on the 'Vivid' picture setting with most of the contrast-related tweaks set to max produces a simply stunning 3D picture.

I am a fan of Active 3D over Passive as it delivers truly eye-popping Full HD images. The only irritation with some 3D discs, for me, is when a studio decides to crop a movie from





Matt's cinema room is packed with DVDs, Blu-rays and movie memorabilia





its original aspect ratio of 2.40:1 to 16:9 for the 3D release (*Titanic*, *I Robot*). I understand why they do it, but it should be left and presented as the director intended. Having said that, there are a number of clever picture settings on the Philips which expertly convert 16:9 images to fit the screen.

I was disappointed to learn that Philips is discontinuing its 21:9 range due to lack of demand. I can't see me wanting to go back to a 16:9 set in the future so I hope another manufacturer sees the potential in this format.

Roughly how much have you spent on your whole setup?
The current system probably cost around £5,000 to put together.

And what's next on your kit wishlist?
Well, as I've just upgraded my receiver and Blu-ray player I'm hoping for an upgrade-free 2013! If I am to upgrade, though, it will be by adding two additional speakers for a 7.1 setup.

What's your favourite bit of kit?
Obviously I love the TV, but the recent upgrade from an old Pioneer VSX-2014i to the SC-2022 has made a massive improvement to the sound quality of my system. I can now decode HD audio from this receiver and I've been surprised just how much more robust it is.

What do your friends and family think of your AV passion?
They know my love of movies, although probably think I buy too many Blu-rays. I get a number of comments saying how it is understandable that I rarely venture out to the cinema...

What's your favourite Blu-ray?
I have so many it is difficult to pick one. I love the original *When A Stranger Calls* and have put up with watching cropped, poor-quality DVDs of this movie for ages. I recently imported the new US Blu-ray release and to finally watch a decent transfer of this classic was like watching it for the first time. In terms of modern movies I love the remake of *Last House on the Left*, the reissued double-feature *Grindhouse* with the fake trailers, and Sam Raimi's *The Possession*.

What do you use to show off the system to your friends?
Casino Royale for regular viewing as both picture and audio are absolutely flawless. It is also my favourite Bond film. Friends have been keen to see the 3D in action and in that respect *Piranha 3D* has gone down very well – amazing 3D (particularly for a conversion) and a very entertaining popcorn flick.

Are you excited by 4K/Ultra HD?
I think the industry has overloaded us with improvements over recent years (HD Ready, Full HD, 3D HD, HD Audio) and I think the majority of people would like to enjoy their current equipment for a while before upgrading again. Let's face it: a lot of people don't really see enough of a benefit of Blu-ray over DVD so I think it will have limited appeal. Having said that, when it is time to replace my TV I will look for a 4K model. I just hope someone decides to produce a 21:9 version! ■

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BE IN HCC!

EMAIL US: If you want to share your home cinema setup with other readers, email a selection of hi-res pictures (including one of yourself) to letters@homecinemachoice.com with the subject heading 'AV-Holic' – and please include a contact telephone number.

ADVERTISEMENT

Home cinema

Which sort of visual system do you go for? Projector and screen, or plasma, LCD or LED TV? 3D or non-3D?

Choosing a home cinema system is a potential minefield that must be negotiated with great care or safely avoided by letting experts guide you. If you want to end up with a system that, as a minimum, meets your expectations in terms of picture and sound quality, reading magazine product reviews and choosing the recommendations, five-star favourites or best buys can only ever be part of the answer at best. Looking for the cheapest price and having a system delivered to your door, even with a 'knowledgeable' friend to help set it up, is a well-trodden path to disappointment.

There is a bewildering choice of components on the market today and also different ways in which components can be installed and connected together. Which sort of visual system do you go for? Projector and screen, or plasma, LCD or LED TV? 3D or non-3D? Full 1080p capability is now the only sensible choice but the appropriate source components, such as a Blu-ray player, need to be part of the equation.

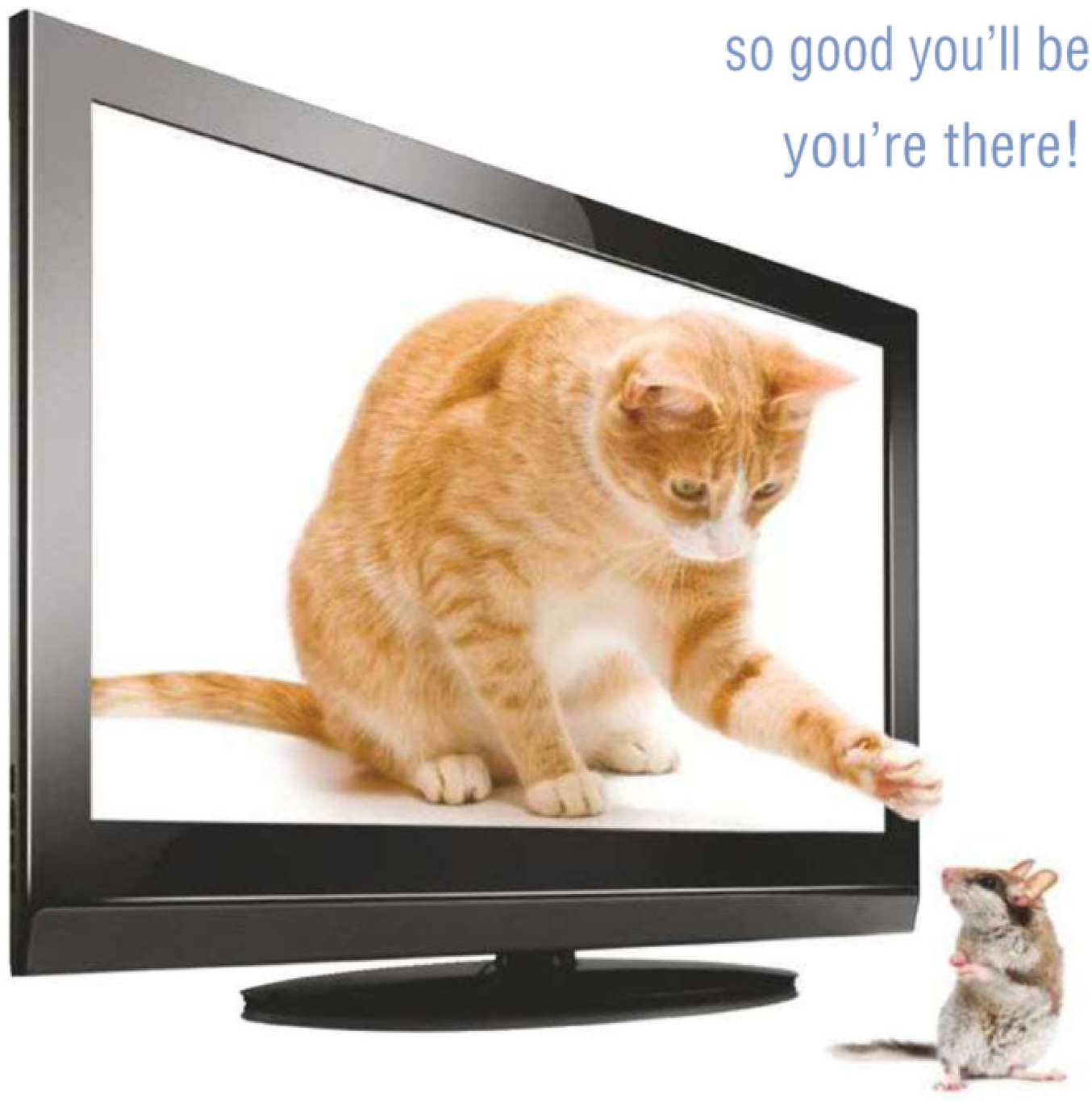
The sound performance of a system is also hugely important, even more so if you will be listening to music, or music DVD's, through the same system. If so, you need an amp that approaches the performance of a decent 2-channel hi-fi amp, which is not that easy to find. Having an amp with the right inputs for the best connectivity is essential but you will also need to decide on a 5.1 or 7.1 speaker system, passive or active sub and, crucially, where they will be sited for the best results. In short, it's complicated and very fertile ground for getting it wrong.

Achieving potential

To select a system, you could choose a collection of 'Best Buy' components in the hope that they will be a great combination. Maybe, but probably not. You could buy a pre-packaged all-in-one system from one manufacturer. This is almost certainly not the best route either, as you will miss out on enormous potential. From informal surveys conducted, it appears highly likely that the majority of home cinema systems selected and installed on a DIY basis (that is without professional input) are performing at way below their optimum level. To compound matters, most are also ill-matched to the room in which they are installed and are, in reality, the wrong system. Without considerable knowledge or experience, high quality home cinema is not a suitable DIY activity. Our aim must be to buy a home cinema system that will provide an excellent picture quality plus an audio delivery that will match, or even better, the commercial cinema experience. It must be exciting, reliable and deliver true value for money.

> Selecting and installing home cinema on a DIY basis may leave the system performing at way below its optimum level.

> "Home cinema so good you'll believe you're there!"



Confused ?

What and Where to buy

To ensure a home cinema system is right for you, where do you start? Here's an important tip …don't start with WHAT, start with WHERE. There's only one way to give yourself the best chance of getting it right first time, and that's through a specialist AV dealer. It's possible you have preconceived ideas that put you off visiting one. Although you would welcome the advice and guidance, you don't know the technical jargon. You don't want to be talked down to. Your friend has said they only sell expensive gear and they're not interested if you don't have a big budget. They're expensive. These are just myths.

Most specialist AV dealers are running their business because, above all, home cinema is their hobby. They spend a large portion of their time comparing systems to get the best possible results. They know the component combinations which don't gel together and, conversely, they know the combinations which give the best performance within a given price range. Very importantly, they know how to get a system working to its optimum. But they all also know the system must suit you.

Buying or being sold to

There are dealers around, web based or otherwise, who will sell you anything you are willing to pay for. They may be a bit cheaper but that's all they offer. Now there's a carefully selected group of long-established specialist dealers who are totally committed to putting the customer first. Their idea of 'selling' is to discuss your requirements, offer their advice, give you the best options, then play the systems for you and allow you to be the judge. You'll probably be surprised and, almost certainly, relieved to discover how easy it is to see and hear the differences between components and between systems. You'll be able to make a clear and informed decision about what to buy.

The story doesn't end there. These shops won't abandon you once you've put your hand in your pocket. They won't leave you to set up the system you've selected as best you can. They'll install it in your home, make sure it performs to its best, and ensure you're entirely happy with the way it works. Why? Because a high proportion of these dealers' custom comes through people who have bought from them before, either directly or by recommendation. It's vital to them to get it right for you.

Getting the best deal

Unless you've got money to burn, you'll be living with your new system for years. Most of these dealers offer much longer equipment guarantees than provided by the manufacturer, a very worthwhile benefit, but it also makes it in the dealer's interest to ensure high build quality and reliability. Maybe you could save a few pounds by buying piecemeal but you'll lose out on the overall package. As far as the dealers are concerned, they believe that taking care of their customers properly is a far better way of doing business than just handing over boxes.



The Dealers listed below have been selected because they are known to do an excellent job in guiding customers towards home cinema systems that will provide years of superlative performance and total satisfaction.

Our Top20 AV shops in the country

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Chelmsford
RAYLEIGH HI-FI SOUND & VISION
216 Moulsham Street. 01245 265245
www.rayleighhifi.com

Kingston-upon-Thames
INFIDELITY
9 High Street, Hampton Wick.
020 8943 3530
www.infidelity.co.uk

Maidenhead
AUDIO VENUE
36 Queen Street. 01628 633995
www.audiovenue.com

Norwich
MARTINS HI-FI
85-91 Ber Street. 01603 627134
www.martinshifi.co.uk

Rayleigh, Essex
RAYLEIGH HI-FI SOUND & VISION
44a High Street. 01268 779762
CUSTOM INSTALL DEPT.
01268 776932
www.rayleighhifi.com

Southend-on-Sea
RAYLEIGH HI-FI SOUND & VISION
132/4 London Road. 01702 435255
www.rayleighhifi.com

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KENT HOME CINEMA
69 London Road, Southborough.
01892 535007
www.kenthomecinema.co.uk

LONDON

Ealing
AUDIO VENUE
27 Bond Street. 020 8567 8703
www.audiovenue.com

N1 GRAHAMS HI-FI
190a New North Road. 020 7226 5500
www.grahams.co.uk

SW11 ORANGES & LEMONS
61-63 Webbs Road, Battersea.
020 7924 2040
www.oandlhifi.co.uk

MIDLANDS

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www.frankharvey.co.uk

Nottingham
CASTLE SOUND & VISION
48/50 Maid Marian Way.
0115 9584404
www.castlesoundvision.com

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93-95 Hobs Moat Road.
0121 742 0254
www.musicmatters.co.uk

NORTH

York
SOUND ORGANISATION
2 Gillygate.
01904 627108
www.soundorg.co.uk

BADA CEDIA

The majority of the above dealers are members of one or both of the major trade organisations, BADA or CEDIA.

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…Talk to the experts

REWIND

The UK's first free-to-air HD channel, BBC HD, recently signed off. **Mark Craven** remembers when it was first launched in 2006

THE SUMMER OF 2006 felt like a good one. Superman was returning to our cinema screens (he sucked), England were going to win the World Cup (they sucked) and the BBC began its trials of the UK's first free-to-air HD channel called – obviously – BBC HD. Thankfully, it didn't suck.

Sky, of course, pipped Auntie to the HD post, launching its Sky HD platform in May of that year with nine channels. Yet for the non-Sky masses, eager to finally feed their HD Ready sets with some actual HD, the BBC's development was manna from heaven, even though it was another 18 months before it went from trial status to fully-fledged channel, and didn't finish rolling out to all of the UK's regions until late last year. And then, in March this year, it ceased to exist, being replaced by the BBC Two HD simulcast.

Vision of the future

'HD will be the SD of the future.' So said the BBC's Vision director, Jana Bennett, when interviewed in *HCC* # 131. 'But how long that will actually take to happen we don't know.' (It certainly hasn't happened yet – see the *Fast Forward* box on the opposite page).

'HD broadcasting will start in something of a modest way this year,' she continued, 'with an uptake that some might describe as low, but no one should doubt that it is here to stay. Anyone who has visited retailers, and seen all the HD Ready screens, won't doubt that. TV sales are high, and that implies that audiences are already ahead of broadcasters.'

More importantly, the content creators were ahead of broadcasters, too. The award-winning documentary series *Planet*



BBC HD bowed out in March – its final act was to broadcast a range of 'historic' testcards...

What we said then...

A The PS3 no one wanted

In this issue we reported on the worrying news that Sony was releasing a 20GB PlayStation 3 console with no HDMI output – thankfully, it never arrived in the UK

B A new era

Naturally, Team HCC was excited by the prospect of free-to-air HD, labelling it a new era of television. We're keeping that phrase in the vault for when/if UHD broadcasts materialise

C Focus on football

Ever since the birth of high-definition TV, broadcasters have boasted about its benefits with sports material, bringing greater realism to live events. Yet seeing England go out on penalties in the quarter-final was no better in HD, really

Earth, filmed in HD, was already in the can, just waiting for a channel to show off its jaw-dropping visuals.

'[BBC HD] will transform programmes like *Planet Earth*, revealed Bennett. 'We said when we launched it, this was the world as you've never seen it before. But we knew back then that standard-definition viewers would never really see what the filmmakers had seen through their high-definition lens.'

Other broadcasts in the channel's first few months included matches from the 2006 World Cup and the Wimbledon tennis championship, live coverage of the Queen's 80th birthday celebrations, plus drama series such as *Bleak House* and *Hotel Babylon*. Later in 2006, those able to receive the transmissions were treated to the likes of *Planet Earth 2* and *Galapagos*. 'It's a technical upgrade that enables users to get the best from their televisions, but we hope to show that it's also a creative enabler,' enthused Bennett.

Dogged by a DOG

Over its seven-year lifespan, BBC HD wasn't free from criticism. Its original broadcast resolution of 1,440 x 1,080, while still 'HD' by the standards of the European Broadcasting Union, drew the ire of tech-hedz, as did the reduction in bitrates in 2009. And then there was the DOG (Digital Onscreen Graphic), which served as a constant reminder that viewers were watching hi-def, and raised fears of the dreaded screenburn. The Beeb didn't help matters when, in 2008, it accidentally ramped up the DOG to 100 per cent white, rather than it's usual semi-transparent state.

When we spoke to the BBC's head of HDTV, Seetha Kuma, in the same issue, she confirmed the channel would launch with a DOG, but hinted the trial broadcasts would help gauge audience reaction. As the DOG was still wagging its tale up the channel's eventual demise, it seems that viewer complaints weren't enough to dissuade the broadcaster from its policy. At least it doesn't 'terrier-ise' BBC One or BBC Two HD... ■



Fast-forward

HD is everywhere – but it pays to pay



BBC HD became the first free-to-air HD channel in the UK. Now, seven years after its initial launch, Freeview viewers have seen their hi-def option increase to, er, four channels – BBC One HD, the new BBC Two HD, ITV HD and Channel 4 HD. Freesat viewers are slightly better served by the addition of NHK World HD and Russia Today HD (we did say 'slightly'...).

As such, telly addicts keen to gorge on a predominantly hi-def diet have little choice but to head down the subscription route, either via Virgin Media's cable service (pictured top) or Sky's satellite platform (below). The cost involved can be high if you want access to every HD channel going – a top-flight Sky subscription is more than £50 per month, excluding hardware and line rental costs – but the range of content, we'd argue, is worth it, especially when you add in all the HD on-demand content available from both platforms.



HDBaseT:

The wired evolution of entertainment



The ultimate goal of any forward-thinking home entertainment system is to be fully networked. Helpfully there's a new technology in town which does just that. Steve May gets connected with HDBaseT

HOME CINEMA IS changing. Sure, screens are getting larger and more pixel-packed, and there's a plethora of streaming options available – both in terms of content and hardware – but there's also evolution happening at a more fundamental level, and it has the potential to change everything. Called HDBaseT, it represents an entirely new way of moving sound, vision and data around your house. But, of course, there's more to it than that...

You won't need past life regression therapy to recall what a pain routing video around the home used to be. In the days of analogue, tortuous RF-based networks offered limited and often compromised AV signal distribution; video senders that promised wireless convenience were, more often than not, even worse. The shift to digital and hi-def may have massively improved the situation but equally has brought its own complications. Long runs of HDMI are unwieldy at best and distances are limited (need more than 20m? Forget it) even with repeaters. Wireless HDMI transmitters are surprisingly effective, but again have limitations in terms of reach and are something of a one-trick pony. A different solution entirely was required: HD over 100m of Cat6? That'll do nicely.

Of course, running hi-def AV over network cable isn't particularly new. The custom install community has been pouring HD video, audio and two-way IR and RS232 control gubbins over dual-cable UTP for yonks, but HDBaseT is a different cat altogether. Adrian Ickeringill, general manager of Wyrestorm, describes it simply as 'an installer's dream. You're getting more for less and you're getting it faster, easier and more reliable.'



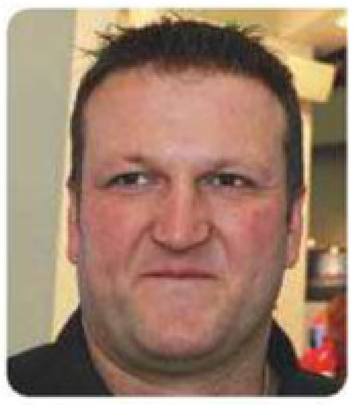
He enthuses: 'HDBaseT is tailor-made for Smart TVs and next-generation Ultra HD displays. It's even resistant to electromagnetic interference.' Sounds almost too good to be true, doesn't it?

HDBaseT origins

HDBaseT first broke cover at CES in 2009. Based on semiconductor technology developed by Valens, it appeared to promise much at the time but just how it would ultimately manifest was unclear. Perhaps one misconception worth clearing up is that HDBaseT is not a replacement for HDMI – it's better thought of as transmission carriage for multiple types of signal, one that just happens to be suitable for deployment over long distances. The HDBaseT Alliance, formed to coordinate product development of the standard, was given early credence by LG, Samsung and Sony Pictures Entertainment, although it has to be said that CE brands in general have been surprisingly slow to wake up to its potential. Today the technology is largely being dominated by a trio of UK-based brands: Wyrestorm, CYP and HD Anywhere.

HDBaseT is commonly described as offering 5Play convergence– that's to say you can use it to simultaneously carry HD video, audio, internet, power and control data over a single Cat5e/6 cable. As the system utilises standard network RJ45 connectivity, installation is straightforward. If you've ever laid down a home Ethernet network, then you'll be in familiar territory. What's more, the bandwidth of the system is seriously impressive. HDBaseT can handle uncompressed video and audio up to 10.2 Gbps, and is completely compatible with 3D and multichannel audio; indeed it's simpatico with v1.4a of the HDMI spec. And yes, that does mean you can (theoretically, we haven't tried it yet) pipe 4K from pillar to post. This single wire can even be used to simultaneously deliver up to 25.5W of electrical power (the IEEE 802.3at-2009 PoE standard); this Power over Ethernet (PoE) functionality means that many HDBaseT receiving units don't even need to be plugged into a power supply to work. And did we mention that there's also capacity for a 100Mbps network connection? A fat pipe indeed...

Not that all HDBaseT is created equal. There are two flavours, Lite and Full. The Lite version utilises a stripped-down Valens chipset which delivers a more limited feature set: HD video (but



Wyrestorm's general manager Adrian Ickeringill



Chris Pinder, managing director of HD Connectivity



CYP's sales and marketing director Phil Davis

not 4K), multichannel audio, control signals and less power, effective over a shorter distance of (only) 70m. For jobs where networking support isn't important and distance isn't an issue, a Lite hardware package should do fine and be cheaper than its bells and whistles equivalent.

It's worth pointing out that for HDBT hardware to work it has to negotiate HDCP with any connected display. If this fails you'll see a green screen or digital snow. For example, one system *HCC* evaluated failed to function with a Pioneer Kuro plasma because of just such an HDCP handshake issue, and this is not a screen you can expect to see any firmware updates for anytime soon. HDBT also relies on EDID data to determine exactly what level of video resolution or audio format can be supported.

Hardware in a nutshell

Okay, so we've established that Cat5e/6 cable is the conduit for everything, but what else do you need to get started with HDBaseT? Typically a standard installation involves a matrix switch and a receiving unit. Once the preserve of the professional installer, and both expensive and challenging to install, the price of such gadgetry has been driven downwards of late. For example, the latest 4x2 HDBaseT matrix from HD Anywhere, which comprises both a transmitter and receiver, sells for just £500. This puts it firmly within the grasp of enthusiasts.

While commonplace HDBaseT systems employ switching and receiving hardware, a number of other executions have also started to appear. Epson and Panasonic have introduced projectors with HDBaseT built-in (so no receiver unit is required). The system can be used to mainline HD video and power straight direct. This kind of integrated HDBT is a trend to look out for; embedded receivers are seen as one part of the game-changing nature of the tech. The HDBaseT Alliance itself was demonstrating a TV with an embedded receiver at the ISE show earlier this year.

Hardly surprising, then, that HDBaseT is now a red-hot topic with the custom install crowd. Reducing the number of cables to be pulled on a multiroom job is a significant time-saver, after all. The technology also throws a business lifeline to all those satellite and aerial installers who have seen a massive drop in dish demand following the completion of the digital switchover.

Chris Pinder is managing director of HD Connectivity, a company which has been fast tracking HDBaseT hardware under its HD Anywhere marque. He tells us the main attendees to his training courses are now erstwhile aerial installers: 'Many are scrabbling around at the moment, wondering what to do next, unsure of whether to jump onboard with solar or become electricians,' he says. 'HDBaseT networking is a logical next step.'

Phil Davis, sales and marketing director



An 8x8 matrix, such as this unit from CYP, will suit professional applications

Hardware heroes

HDBaseT gizmos we've got our eye on

Wyrestorm HDBaseT AMP-001-010 amplifier



Most HDBaseT kit comes in matrix/receiver configurations, yet the Wyrestorm AMP-001-010 is the world's first HDBaseT audio amplifier, and it shows just how the technology could transform even the most staid of AV components. A diminutive stereo amplifier, optimised to deliver audio as part of a multizone home entertainment system, it retails for £675 – and combines networked AV, local audio input and 50W of Class D amplification.

The AMP-001-010 extracts stereo audio direct from the HDBT signal and amplifies it locally. Spring-clip terminals hookup stereo speakers, and there's a dedicated subwoofer output plus an HDMI feed for the display. This effectively enables you to install a superior screen and sound system in a second room, using nothing but a single wire from your source matrix. The HDMI output offered by the amp is also ARC compliant, and so allows TV audio to route back. Personal audio can also be input via a 3.5mm jack, and if you need more muscle, pre-outs are provided.

CYP PU-424HBTE 4x4 matrix switcher



The PU-424HBTE from CYP is a versatile 4x4 HDBaseT matrix which offers not one but two simultaneous local HDMI outputs, one to feed a flatscreen and a second to route into an AV receiver, projector or second screen. Designed for the pro-install market, it's a full 5Play package (HD video, multichannel audio, networking, PoE and two-way control), and can support four HDBT streams over RJ45. It partners with the brand's PU-507-RX receiver, which can take advantage of Power over Ethernet, so no local supply is required, or alternatively the PU-507-WPRX wall plate. As with the majority of HDBaseT matrices out there, the kit can be fully integrated into a more sophisticated control system, be it RTI, Crestron, AMX or Control4. It retails for £3,450.

Panasonic Digital Link Solid Shine PJs



Panasonic has released a quartet of hybrid DLP LED/laser projectors featuring HDBaseT connectivity. The Solid Shine series comprises four 3D-capable models each offering around 20,000 hours of maintenance-free life. The Full HD PT-RZ370 (£3,250) and WXGA PT-RW330 (£2,500) are typically intended for commercial use in boardrooms and lecture halls, while the Full HD PT-RZ470 (£3,650) and WXGA PT-RW430 (£2,920) are light cannons designed for events and exhibitions. Oddly, Panasonic has renamed HDBaseT as Digital Link for these PJs, but they're fully compatible with other HDBaseT products.

at HDBaseT supplier CYP, agrees: 'We're also seeing established satellite and aerial installers moving into AV distribution, attracted by the simplicity of the system. This is a pivotal development for the industry. One of our HDBaseT products allows you to take a Sky box, and run it to three rooms in a house with full IR control, for just £400. It's a perfect fit.'

HD Anywhere believes HDBaseT has a very real future in the consumer market. 'I want to produce products that are affordable,' says Pinder. 'That's the reason we've produced the 4x2 at a competitive price point. Having HDBaseT built into consumer displays will really help drive that idea further.'

But Pinder tells us that he's disappointed that household consumer electronics brands have yet to put HDBT onto their roadmaps; he believes they're missing a trick. 'Loewe is currently the only TV manufacturer contemplating HDBaseT for its TVs,' he reveals. 'They're doing that because the custom install business for them is turning into a really important channel, so they'll listen to what we're saying.' By way of comparison, he says Panasonic doesn't share the same vision, seeing HDBaseT more applicable to its commercial display division, where it solves practical problems in larger venues where it's often difficult to get to an HD signal to the projector. 'Unfortunately, they don't see any need to do it on consumer TVs...'



Loewe is contemplating the use of HDBaseT in forthcoming TVs

What can HDBaseT do for you?

So how would you use HDBaseT in your own home? Well, unlike traditional multiroom cabling options, the technology has few constraints. Let's consider a typical home configuration: your main living room has a Sky+ HD box, Blu-ray player and an all-singing and dancing media player. These flow to a flatscreen via that stonking big AV amplifier – but what you really want to do is be able to watch all three sources on your bedroom telly as well. All you need to achieve this is a basic HDBaseT matrix and receiver – for example the HD Anywhere 4x2. This matrix has 4-in, 1-out HDMI inputs, plus two HDBaseT RJ45 jacks which work with Cat5e or Cat6 cable.

All you need do to crack this multiroom nut is run a single cable direct to your bedroom set. This then inputs into a small HDBaseT receiver, which has an HDMI and Ethernet output. As the system delivers Power over Ethernet, your receiver doesn't need a local power source. Just run an HDMI from the receiver straight into the TV. Any one of your living room sources can be selected by remote, because IR blasters allow zappers to function in the second room. Signal latency is extremely low, so remote lag is generally not an issue. Pretty funky, eh? Now for added spice, let's assume your bedroom TV has Smart functionality. That's no problem either, as the Ethernet output from the receiver can deliver a network connection as well.

Of course, our imaginary second system doesn't need to be subservient to the source system. You can use exactly the same single-wire feed to fuel a full-blown theatre. As the Cat cable can carry 1080p video and multichannel audio, there's no reason why this can't act as the sole source input for an AV receiver in your secondary location. And as network access can be routed concurrently, this secondary home cinema can have full access to internet radio, or content stored on networked devices.

There are configurational caveats though: if you are routing a Blu-ray player into a secondary room to feed a home cinema system, this impacts on what's happening on the matrix's HDMI output. If the BD player is delivering a DTS-HD Master Audio bitstream to an AVR via the HDBaseT receiver, and the matrix HDMI output is feeding a TV, that TV will not convey any audio. Optimise the matrix/HDMI output to feed the local TV, and the receiver-delivered audio will then be stereo only.

Obviously the bigger the matrix, the more rooms you can drive with content – and they all work in the same way. A 4x4 matrix will take four different sources to four different locations using a single wire to each, while an 8x8 doubles that. These larger matrices are more expensive and not intended for consumer use. Pro-installers will deploy them in commercial projects, perhaps wiring up a college campus, fitting out a hotel hospitality area or routing video to signage displays in a shopping mall (eight 100m cable lengths can be multi-hopped to cover a massive distance).

Educating the masses

Everyone in the industry knows that there's a considerable amount of education to be done before this nascent technology has any hope of clicking with the mainstream. 'When it comes to the consumer side of things there's a massive amount that needs to be done,' admits HD Connectivity's Chris Pinder. 'Even Sonos still has that issue now, trying to get across to the uninitiated in a concise way exactly what its proposition can do. It's even tougher with HDBaseT. HD networking for the home? Many won't even understand what you're talking about. This is where I get really disappointed with the likes of BT. The BT Home Hub could be an amazing single-box solution had it incorporated HDBaseT as well as Wi-Fi – everything you need from one device! But the telcos aren't anywhere near to getting it.' For the time being, it seems, HDBaseT is likely to remain a secret of the home networking cognoscenti. But that doesn't make it any less revolutionary ■

THE ENTRY-LEVEL

LINDY Electronics joins the HDBaseT party

While the HDBaseT market is currently dominated by pro-grade players such as CYP, HD Anywhere, Gefen and Wyrestorm, the field of suppliers is widening. Accessory specialist LINDY Electronics has just released a low-cost HDBaseT HDMI transmitter/receiver package able to route uncompressed HDMI traffic up to 100m. Priced at just £299, the system includes IR extension cables for both units, allowing two-way remote control communication. The system is not, however, a switch.

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PLAYBACK

→**SOFTWARE HIGHLIGHTS** **WRECK-IT RALPH** Disney targets the joystick generation with its latest 3D animated blockbuster **THE IMPOSSIBLE** Modern-day disaster movie unleashes awe-inspiring audio **RISE OF THE GUARDIANS** Santa is a superhero? **THE LAST STAND** Arnie returns to his action movie roots **KNIGHTRIDERS** Romero's forgotten flick reborn in hi-def **AND MUCH MORE!**

Hobbit-forming

The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey 3D → Warner Home Video → All-region BD



It seems you just can't stop Peter Jackson from turning J.R.R. Tolkien's books into bigscreen fantasy trilogies – even when they are as slight as *The Hobbit*. Turn to p98 to find out if his latest attempt makes for another must-own Blu-ray blockbuster

HCC RATINGS KEY...

Outstanding	★★★★★
Above average	★★★★☆
Acceptable	★★★☆☆
Disappointing	★★☆☆☆
Dire	★☆☆☆☆

Arnie spots another of his old housekeepers chatting to a reporter



Schwarzenegger shoots back

Arnie's return to your cinema room is an unashamedly dumb action film – and all the better for it





HCC VERDICT

The Last Stand
→ Lionsgate → Region B BD
→ £23 Approx
WE SAY: It may be an old-school action flick, but Arnie's latest both looks and sounds cutting-edge in HD

Movie ★★★½
Picture ★★★★½
Audio ★★★★½
Extras ★★★
Overall ★★★½

→ The Last Stand

Having wrapped up an eight-year term as Governor of California, it was no surprise to learn that Arnold Schwarzenegger was planning a return to the silver screen. But at 65 years of age, many wondered if the former superstar would still have what it takes to kick ass with the best of them.

Unpretentious old-school flick *The Last Stand* casts Schwarzenegger as Ray Owens, the sheriff of a small town in Arizona. But his usually quiet life is thrown into disarray when a notorious drug cartel kingpin escapes from FBI custody and makes a break for the border in a souped-up Corvette – and the only people standing in his way are Ray and a rag-tag bunch of townsfolk.

Of course, it's completely stupid (the escaping kingpin also happens to be a part-time racing car driver). But, like the best '80s action films, it's also a lot of fun. Arnie still looks at home brandishing massive firearms and – like some of Stallone's recent films – he makes his advancing years work for him, adding a sense of danger to the finale where he goes hand-to-hand with the younger, faster villain.

As well as the sheer pleasure found in watching the Austrian Oak get back into the action, a large part of *The Last Stand*'s success rests on the shoulders of South Korean director Kim Ji-woon (making his Hollywood debut). This popcorn flick benefits from the same kind of verve and over-the-top energy that made his 2008 'Eastern Western', *The Good, the Bad and the Weird*, an international smash hit.

Picture: *The Last Stand* looks pretty spectacular in hi-def thanks to this Blu-ray's exceptionally sharp and colourful AVC 2.40:1 1080p encode.

Close-ups of Arnie's weathered face highlight every little (and not so little) crease and wrinkle in immaculate detail, while the saturated palette gives the film a slightly heightened sense of reality that serves the material extremely well. Even the handful of night sequences hold up to close scrutiny, with only some minor crush and loss of shadow detail in the deepest blacks to complain about.

The only downside to the remarkable clarity and sharpness is that it does sometimes highlight a couple of the less-that-successful CG effects – most notably the location of the final showdown.

Audio: The disc's DTS-HD MA 7.1 mix delivers almost everything you could want from a bullet-strewn affair like this. There's not a lot of subtlety to the sound design, but who cares when it throws cars, gunfire and explosions around the soundfield with such power, precision and clarity? Dialogue is well-handled (even if nothing will ever overcome Arnie's natural dialect), as is Korean composer Mowg's wonderful Western-influenced score.

Extras: Lionsgate's BD packs in a reasonable batch of bonus features. Not only is there a half-hour *Making of...* documentary, but you also get a breakdown of one of the car stunt sequences, a featurette about the film's vintage weaponry, behind-the-scenes handycam footage shot by actors Johnny Knoxville and Jaimie Alexander, six deleted scenes and seven extended scenes.

Silver Linings Playbook

Entertainment in Video → Region B BD
£23 Approx



Not quite as sophisticated as the awards-hype led us to believe, but this likeable film still manages to inject some much-needed intelligence, strong performances and a sense of emotional realism back into the usually trite rom-com genre. EiV's hi-def release provides a slightly dull AVC 2.40:1 108 encode that often lacks detail – although this appears to be endemic of the source material rather than the disc itself. The DTS- HD MA 5.1 mix is more accomplished, with superb dynamic range. Ten cast and crew interviews are the only extras.

★★★½☆

The Man with the Iron Fists

Universal Pictures → All-region BD
£20 Approx



Written by, directed and starring the Wu-Tang Clan's RZA, *The Man with the Iron Fists* is less a love letter to Hong Kong martial arts movies than a tortured pastiche-come-vanity project that wears out its welcome long before the final credits role. On a positive note, it does at least sound absolutely riotous on Blu-ray thanks to a thunderous DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix. It also looks epic, with a surprisingly refined AVC 2.40:1 1080p encode. However, apart from including two versions of the film ('theatrical' and 'unrated'), the disc's extras are minimal.

★★☆☆☆

Pitch Perfect

Universal Pictures → All-region BD
£25 Approx



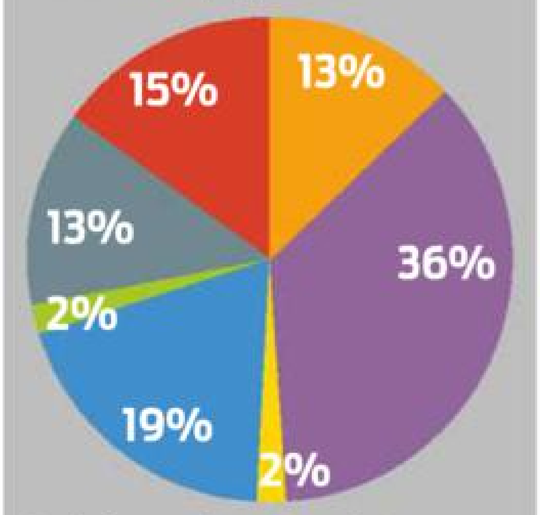
The very idea of a film about the struggles of an all-female collegiate *a-capella* group is enough to send most people running for cover. But trust us when we say this is no mere *Glee* cash-in. Yes, there's singing (and plenty of it), but instead of overwrought emotional guff, *30 Rock* writer Kay Cannon gives us brilliant characters and no end of great gags. Unsurprisingly, the Blu-ray's DTS-HD MA 5.1 soundtrack is itself 'pitch perfect' when it comes to the film's musical numbers, and is supported by an equally impressive 1080p encode, plus some fun extras – including a pair of chat-tracks.

★★★★☆

We asked...

Which is the best Quentin Tarantino film?

Reservoir Dogs ■ Pulp Fiction ■ Jackie Brown ■ Kill Bill: Vol. 1 ■ Kill Bill: Vol. 2 ■ Inglourious Basterds ■ Django Unchained



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Santa and the superhero squad

DreamWorks' latest CG animation invites you on a quest to save childhood innocence

→ Rise of the Guardians

With a story that brings together Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny, Sandman, the Tooth Fairy and Jack Frost to do battle with Pitch Black (aka Pitch, aka The Boogeyman), *Rise of the Guardians* is essentially the *Avengers Assemble* of seasonal movies.

Sadly, underneath the stylish animation and super-powered characters is a predictable family adventure about having faith in yourself and finding your place in the world (a similar problem also affects Disney's *Wreck-It Ralph*, see p102). This is a real shame, as the cast of characters is excellent and merits a better adventure – and the film's lack of ambition and the fact that it failed to turn a profit means that they'll probably never get the chance to prove it.



Picture: Eye-popping colours, exquisite textures, crystal-clear motion and not a trace of any technical imperfections such as artefacting or aliasing. In other words, the AVC 1.78:1 1080p encode DreamWorks has cooked up for the Blu-ray release of *Rise of the Guardians* is everything AV-philes have come to expect from big budget CG 'toons in hi-def. Naturally, there are no shortage of AV demo sequences for those who want to show off what their system is capable of – we're particularly fond of the Guardians' spectacular final showdown with Pitch.

Audio: *Rise of the Guardians* hits Blu-ray with an exceptionally rich and powerful Dolby TrueHD 7.1 soundtrack that will delight audiophiles.

Every single aspect of the soundtrack – from dynamic range to musical tonality, steering to bass – is brilliantly rendered and gels together seamlessly. And we aren't just talking about pure audio bombast either: check out Jack's encounter with Pitch in Chapter 9 to see how nuanced and controlled the soundtrack is at its very best.

Extras: Younger viewers get a couple of basic set-top games to enjoy after the film comes to an end (*Jack Frost Snowball Showdown!* and *Rock, Paper, Scissors with Sandy*). Meanwhile, older fans can dig into four short behind-the-scenes featurettes (*Dreaming Up the Look*, *Naughty & Nice: Designing Memorable Characters*, *Enchanting Effects* and *Creating an Epic Score*), two additional featurettes about the cast (*Dreamers & Believers*) and the author of the *Guardians of Childhood* books, William Joyce (*The Man Behind the Guardians*), and a commentary by the director and two of the producers.

The set also includes a *Rise of the Guardians* DVD, plus the code for an iTunes Digital Copy.





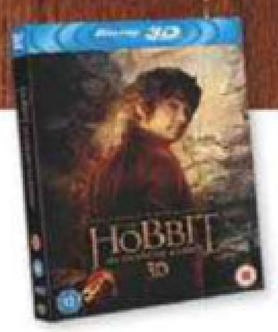
HCC Verdict

Rise of the Guardians: Triple Play
→ DreamWorks/Paramount
→ All-region BD/R2 DVD → £25 Approx
WE SAY: A disappointing animated outing for DreamWorks – although the Blu-ray itself is a real AV miracle

Movie	★★½☆☆
Picture	★★★★★
Audio	★★★★★
Extras	★★★☆☆
Overall	★★★☆☆

Steelmags.com

The Hobbit reunites Martin Freeman (Bilbo Baggins) with his *Sherlock* co-star Benedict Cumberbatch (The Necromancer)



Sluggish start to an epic quest

Peter Jackson struggles to recapture movie magic with the first part of his new Tolkien trilogy







As well as playing Gollum, Andy Serkis also worked as a second unit director

→ The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey 3D

Set 60 years prior to *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Hobbit* tells the story of reluctant adventurer Bilbo Baggins, who joins the wizard Gandalf and a group of dwarves on a quest to reclaim their former home and the treasure it contains from the dragon Smaug.

Or, at least, that's the idea behind the book – for his three-part film adaptation, Jackson has decided to turn *The Hobbit* into a true prequel to *The Lord of the Rings*. Which means padding it out with unnecessary cameos (Frodo! Saruman! That chap from *The Matrix*!) and adding in brand-new subplots. Yet, despite all of this ...*An Unexpected Journey* still feels stretched way beyond breaking point and could have done with a good hour or so trimmed off the running time. We can only hope that things pick up for ...*The Desolation of Smaug* later this year.

Picture: It makes no difference whether you opt to watch *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* in 2D or 3D – either way you are in for a sensational Blu-ray viewing experience.

Both of the 2.40:1-framed 1080p encodes continually wow with their extraordinary level of meticulous fine detailing and sumptuous colour reproduction. Edge definition in both is also impeccably handled, as are the contrast levels and shadow delineation.

Best of all, there is no trace of any distracting technical anomalies (such as artefacting or edge enhancement) to spoil your enjoyment of the image – helped in large part by Warner Home Video's sensible decision to split the 3D presentation across two Blu-ray platters, while giving the 2D version its own dedicated hi-def disc.

Audio: For the most part ...*An Unexpected Journey*'s DTS-HD Master Audio 7.1 mix is up there with the very best the format has to offer. The soundfield is incredibly vast and immersive at all times, bristling with ambient effects that help breath life into the world of Middle-earth.

Directionality is also impressive, with the seven-channel surround mix allowing for particularly transparent panning. One of the best examples can be found during the game of riddles with Gollum in Chapter 24, with the corrupted creature's rasping voice moving around the soundfield as he threatens Bilbo from off screen.

However, the lossless track does suffer from a problem with its LFE – specifically, there's very little real low-end activity. The upshot is that scenes such as Chapter 21's battling Rock Giants lack the deep and tactile bass you might expect. While this may go unnoticed by those with modest living room systems, it will be of greater concern to those with dedicated cinema rooms and hardcore bass-junkies, who are likely to find the LFE channel a little lacking compared to those offered by its contemporaries.

Not having seen *The Hobbit*... when it played cinemas, we can't comment on whether or not this situation was also true of the film's native soundtrack, or if it is something that has been introduced in the move to a home theatre mix.

Demo Screen... **The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey 3D** **Time code: 004.55 – 008.08**



Flying high: A dragon-shaped kite drifts over the city of Dale and out of your screen – both a highly effective piece of 3D rendering and neat foreshadowing of the horrors that are to come



Terror from above: As Smaug remains an off-screen presence here, the film relies heavily on the power of its lossless 7.1 soundtrack to bring the dragon to life and enhance the destruction it causes



Gold star: The accuracy of the mix, combined with the sharpness of the imagery, will make you feel like you're one of the dwarves when Smaug dives into the treasure room, throwing gold everywhere



Cliff-top view: The stereoscopic encode helps highlight the epic scale of the devastation as we join Thranduil's Wood-elves on a cliff looking down on the burning city and its fleeing survivors

Extras: While it's obvious that the lion's share of quality extra features are being held back for the inevitable Extended Edition, this initial hi-def release does manage to cobble together a dedicated Blu-ray platter of bonus bits and pieces that may satisfy the less demanding viewer.

The real meat of the bonus goodies comes in the form of ten video blogs (running 127 minutes in total) hosted by Jackson. These cover a variety of different topics – *Start of Production*, *Location Scouting*, *Shooting Block One*, *Filming in 3D*, *Locations Part 1*, *Locations Part 2*, *Stone St. Studios Tour*, *Wrap of Principal Photography*, *Post-Production Overview* and *Wellington World Premiere*. Originally posted online between April 14, 2011 and December 14, 2012, we're glad to have them collected together in 1080p for this release. But at the same time, there's no doubt that die-hard Hobbit-hedz will already have seen them all.

A larger problem comes from the fact that the blogs were ultimately produced to promote this first *Hobbit* film prior to its cinema release, and were therefore unwilling to spoil any of the film's secrets.



Subsequently, they don't go into the kind of detail a dedicated documentary would offer.

Providing that you aren't fed up with looking at the New Zealand scenery after watching the film, Jackson and the production team also spend a little while touring some of the locations used to replicate Middle-earth in the seven-minute *New Zealand: Home of Middle-earth* featurette.

Rounding things off are six film trailers, plus a trio of trailers for the *Guardians of Middle-earth*, *The Hobbit: Kingdoms of Middle-earth* and *Lego The Lord of the Rings* videogames.





Cate Blanchett returns as Galadriel (top) – even though she isn't in Tolkien's novel



While *The Hobbit* was shot at 48fps, the BD is encoded at the usual 24fps



HCC Verdict

The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey 3D
→ Warner Home Video
→ All-region BD → £28 Approx
WE SAY: A magnificent-looking hi-def outing for this bloated fantasy epic

Movie ★★½☆☆
Picture ★★★★★
Audio ★★★★½
Extras ★★☆☆☆
Overall ★★★☆☆

Arcade Action

Bigscreen home entertainment isn't just about movies anymore. Check out these two videogames vying for time on your home cinema system...

Tomb Raider

Square Enix → Xbox 360/PS3/PC → £50 Approx



Reboots are all the rage in Hollywood these days. So it's hardly surprising to find one of gaming's most cinematic franchises getting in on the act – especially given how far the *Tomb Raider* series has fallen from grace over the past couple of console generations.



Given that just as much emphasis has been given to gunplay as to leaping across chasms, it's natural that Crystal Dynamics' reboot of the franchise has drawn comparisons with Naughty Dog's chart-topping *Uncharted* games. But as far as we're concerned it's also a little unfair. After all, how could anybody object to Lara Croft borrowing a few gaming tricks from Nathan Drake when his games already owe a massive debt to her earlier adventures?

What ultimately matters is that this new *Tomb Raider* is not simply the best game of 2013 so far – it's also the best third-person action game since *Batman: Arkham City*. It plays like an absolute dream (Lara's responsiveness makes her a joy to control), it looks and sounds exactly like an epic Hollywood blockbuster and it's got a story and characters that you actually care about (a big round of applause to writer Rhianna 'daughter of Terry' Pratchett). Now let's hope that the same team are all hard at work on a sequel, because we can't wait to see what the future holds for this reinvigorated Lara Croft.

★★★★★

Gears of War: Judgement

Microsoft → Xbox 360 → £50 Approx



Surely nobody really expected that a franchise as lucrative as Microsoft's third-person shooter would end when Marcus Fenix hung up his gun at the end of *Gears of War 3*? After all, the Locust War established that there was a whole universe of narrow corridors and waist-high barriers for soldiers to battle through...



Gears of War: Judgement takes players back to the heart of the conflict as Damon Baird and Kilo Squad stand trial for disobeying orders. Exactly what they did and why they did it only becomes clear as you battle through the game's levels – each a flashback from a different member of the team. And once again it all boils down to players being funnelled through carefully disguised corridors and arenas, where you spend all of your time murderlising the opposition with your oversized weaponry. While the inclusion of optional 'Declassified Missions' (which add extra challenges to each level) and a bonus unlockable campaign are welcome additions, it's basically business at usual. So, for all that ...*Judgement* looks and sounds suitably spectacular as it throws you into the heart of some cracking sci-fi action, the gameplay itself feels more rigid and inflexible than ever before. Thankfully, multiplayer (now bolstered by two new modes) remains compelling, which helps alleviate the problem somewhat.

★★★☆☆

Scanners

Second Sight → Region B BD
£23 Approx



Given how poorly David Cronenberg's early films have been treated in the past, watching this HD outing for his 1981 sci-fi *Scanners* is a real eye-opener. It's hardly the most visually spectacular Blu-ray you'll ever see, but the AVC 1.78:1 1080p encode still exhibits a clarity and wealth of detail in the cinematography without resorting to artificial sharpening tricks. Indeed, the only complaint we have is the complete lack of input from Cronenberg himself in any of the disc's extras.

★★★★☆

Deadly Blessing

Arrow Video → Region B BD/R2 DVD
£23 Approx



This is far from director Wes Craven's finest moment, but there are still some inventive horrors (and a completely nonsensical ending) lying in wait in this largely forgotten 1981 mash-up of religious chillers and psycho slashers. Arrow's AVC 1.78:1 1080p restoration is a little uneven, but still manages to be the best-looking treatment of the film we've seen. An LPCM 2.0 soundtrack copes admirably with the limited material, and generous extras include a commentary by Craven, interviews, a trailer and even a couple of Easter Eggs. Old school!

★★★☆☆

Subspecies/Bloodstone: Subspecies II

88 Films → All-region BD
£16 Each



Full Moon's catalogue of DTV horrors may be packed with guilty pleasures, but these initial entries in the company's 1990s vampire franchise are genuinely effective fright-flicks. Sadly, *Subspecies*' AVC encode is soft throughout, but things improve significantly with the sequel's sharp and detailed 1080p visuals (it also gets a 5.1 audio upgrade, unlike the first film). Several extras are shared across both discs, but they do get their own commentaries and *Videozone* promo featurettes.

★★★½☆

Storemags.com



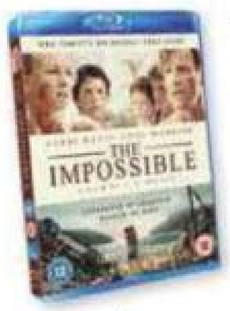
The real family the film's characters are based on are actually Spanish

DISC OF THE MONTH

Wall of water meets wall of sound

This intense real-life disaster movie will sweep you away with its ingenuity and audio design

→ The Impossible



Move over Roland Emmerich, director Juan Antonio Bayona has delivered a disaster movie for a fraction of the cost of your popcorn epics, and it's a magnitude more terrifying.

Based on the true-life tale of tourists caught up in the Indian Ocean tsunami that swamped the coast of Thailand in 2004, the film is a grim, visceral watch that belies its lowly BBFC certificate. Bayona keeps the drama focused on the vacationing family rather than the spectacle, a decision rewarded with particularly strong performances from Naomi Watts and young newcomer Tom Holland.

Picture: *The Impossible* looks terrific on Blu-ray. The 2.40:1 AVC encode is rich in fine detail and revels in a naturalistic, slightly washed-out tropical palette.

Bayona's decision to refrain from overt CGI clearly helps the transition to disc – so often movies which convince on the bigscreen reveal their pixelated DNA when remastered. When the waves rip apart our family's hotel, the only thing which doesn't overflow is the bit bucket.

Audio: *The Impossible*'s DTS-HD MA 5.1 soundtrack is full of surprise. The movie opens with a portentous, ominous LFE swell that bubbles up from the front and ripples to the rear – before immediately rolling forward again as a Thai-bound plane pans from centre back to front. It's the sonic equivalent of being dunked in a wave pool.

There are wonderful little touches throughout – a juicer by the pool assumes an eerie ominous tone seconds before the tsunami hits. As the wave destroys all before it, the soundstage is submerged and disassembled, leaving you battered only by disembodied bass. There's superlative sound design on display here.

Inevitably there's nothing afterwards that quite compares, but the aural intensity is pervasive and you'll be left feeling satiated.

Extras: While *The Impossible* succumbs in part to creeping EPKitis, there's actually a fair amount of interest to be had in the disc's extras.

The audio commentary, by Bayona, his writer Sergio Sanchez and producers Belen Atienza and Maria Belon, is a solid effort and there's depth to the featurettes. *Realizing the Impossible* focuses primarily on the recreation of the tsunami effects. Rather than risk the credibility of the tale with potentially lame CGI water, Bayona's team opted to shoot amid real waves, artfully layered to create an astonishingly effective tidal wave. It's hard not to be impressed by the job done by the principals. 'I was so glad we weren't doing CGI,' says Naomi Watts, 'it would have been a different performance...'

The weakest offering is *Casting the Impossible*, a self-reverential eulogy to and from the cast. You won't learn much from this apart from just how inspirational the actors find each other.

Also included is a raft of cast interviews, all standard EPK chatter, presented largely uncut. While interesting in part, they're not anything you'll want to refer back to. There are also deleted scenes and a theatrical trailer.

A scale model of the resort was used for the tsunami destruction scenes





HCC Verdict

The Impossible
→ EntertainmentOne
→ Region B BD → £25 Approx
WE SAY: This gruelling movie will put you through an emotional wringer, and the sound design is extraordinary

Movie ★★★★☆
Picture ★★★★☆
Audio ★★★★★
Extras ★★★★☆
Overall ★★★★☆

storemags

Q*bert was never seen again after accepting sweets from a stranger



Disney targets joystick junkies



CG-animated celebration of retro-gaming sends the House of Mouse in a retrograde direction

→ Wreck-It Ralph 3D

Disney's latest CG animation is a textbook example of coming up with a great concept for a movie, but then struggling to turn it into a great story.

Wreck-It Ralph has spent all of his life as the house-smashing villain in the arcade game *Fix-It Felix, Jr*. Trouble is, Ralph has grown tired of being the bad guy all the time – so one day he simply ups and leaves his game and ventures off to become a hero in the neighbouring first-person shooter game *Hero's Duty*. That's when the trouble really starts.

As we said, it's a great concept, and one that leads to in-jokes and cameos galore. But once past this basic idea, the story gets bogged down in a predictable mix of Disney schmaltz and 'be yourself' messaging that completely derails the second act. Things do pick up for the finale, but by then many older viewers may well have toddled off to play *CoD*.

Picture: Dazzling is the word here. We may not be massive fans of the film, but *Wreck-It Ralph* easily ranks amongst the best-looking Blu-ray discs on the market right now.

As is par for the course with Disney releases, this imported Blu-ray set features separate hi-def platters for the 2D and 3D presentations of the film. While you'll hardly be surprised to learn that the 'flat' AVC 2.40:1 1080p encode is a showcase for eye-popping colour reproduction, refined detailing and flawless clarity, you may be more than a little shocked to discover how well the three-dimensional MVC 2.40:1 1080p version compares.





HCC Verdict

Wreck-It Ralph: Ultimate Collector's Edition
→ Walt Disney → All-region BD/ R1 DVD (US Import) → £30 Approx
WE SAY: Not Disney's finest hour – but a superb hi-def experience

Movie ★★★☆☆
Picture ★★★★★
Audio ★★★★★
Extras ★★☆☆☆
Overall ★★★½☆

Those expecting to be read about a notable drop in brightness and colour saturation will find no such complaints here. Instead, this BD is all about the tangible volumetrics of its 3D imagery, the excellent contrast levels exhibited by the stereoscopic picture and the sharpness of the visuals. In other words, *Wreck-It Ralph* sees Disney setting a new high score for 3D encodes.

Audio: *Wreck-It Ralph*'s DTS-HD MA 7.1 mix is a worthy equal to the Blu-ray's astonishing visual spectacle. The sound designers have clearly had a fantastic time working in the world of videogames; barely a scene goes by that doesn't feature impeccable cross-channel panning effects or thunderous low-end extension in the LFE channel. Astonishingly, no matter how manic the soundfield gets, the dialogue sounds natural and remain intelligible at all times.

Extras: The most disappointing part of this multi-disc US release is the paucity of extras.

Disney's 2D Blu-ray platter contains a 17-minute *Making of...* featurette, four deleted/extended scenes with optional director's commentary, four fake videogame commercials and the superb animated short *Paperman* that accompanied *Wreck-It Ralph* in cinemas. The disc also features an optional *Disney Intermission* that highlights in-jokes and references whenever the film is paused. The only extra on the 3D disc is a stereoscopic presentation of *Paperman*.

This US set also comes bundled with an R1 DVD of the film and a second DVD housing a Digital Copy.

Justified: Season 3

Sony Pictures → R2 DVD
£40 Approx



'It gets dark. It gets really, really dark,' is how *HCC* favourite Walton Goggins sums up this third season of the hit cop show. And while it doesn't quite measure up to the previous season, *Justified* remains one of the most unpredictable and distinctive TV series currently on the air. While Sony keeps UK fans hanging on for a Blu-ray release, this three-disc DVD is a reasonable alternative due to its cleanly rendered anamorphic 1.78:1 transfers and balanced Dolby Digital 5.1 mix. Extras include nine episode commentaries and two behind-the-scenes featurettes.

★★★★☆

Person of Interest: Season 1

Warner Home Video → All-region BD
£45 Approx

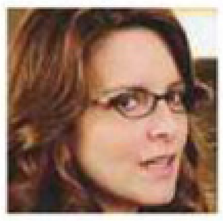


Jim Caviezel and *Lost*'s Michael Emerson star in this fast-paced crime series from the mind of Jonathan (brother of Christopher) Nolan. Seamlessly blending the police procedural and conspiracy thriller with overt comic book concepts, it's a smart and action-packed crowd-pleaser that's found a huge fanbase on TV and (given this four-disc set's top-notch AV credentials) is sure to do the same on Blu-ray. The only real downside is the drab selection of extras: just a chat-track for the pilot episode, extended pilot, one brief featurette and an outtakes reel.

★★★½☆

30 Rock: Season 6

Universal Pictures → Region 2 DVD
£30 Approx



This penultimate run of the award-winning sitcom about the making of a live TV sketch show continues to deliver more laugh-out-loud gags per episode than the vast majority of its peers. Technically, the triple-disc DVD release is pretty comparable to its predecessors. In other words, the anamorphic 1.78:1 transfer is generally sharp and colourful (although some excess softness creeps into a handful of shots) and the DD 5.1 mix is fair, despite not making that much use of the surrounds. Extras include a few commentaries and several videos relating to the season's live episode.

★★★½☆

Side by Side

Axiom Films → R2 DVD
£16 Approx



This documentary finds Keanu Reeves chatting to a variety of famous filmmakers about the pros and cons of the move from using celluloid to shooting digitally. If that sounds rather dull and geeky, it's not. Instead, it's an absorbing and balanced look at a milestone in the development of cinema and a must-see for anybody with even a passing interest in the art of making movies. While the film hasn't been given an HD release in the UK, this two-disc DVD outing fares rather well with an agreeable anamorphic 1.78:1 transfer and DD 5.1 mix. Extras take the form of 14 extended interviews.

★★★★☆



Vampire TV show raises the stakes

HBO's supernatural smash still delivers plenty of bang for your buck on BD

→ True Blood: The Complete Fifth Season

An old face returns to torment our undead heroes, and an even older face tempts them down a path nobody could have predicted, in this latest season of HBO's gory, sexy and curiously camp supernatural series. The end result isn't the best the show has ever been, but it shows clear signs of improvement from the somewhat dreary fourth season.

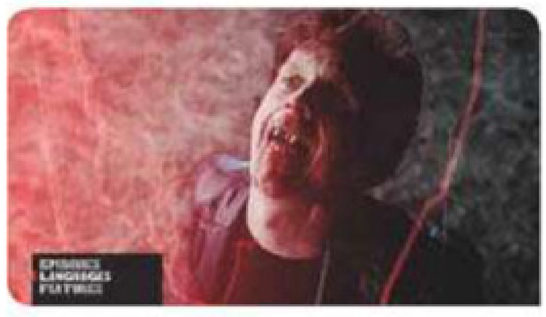
This upturn in quality comes alongside an even greater focus on the show's supporting characters – the writers even manage to transform Tara into an interesting and fun character this time around (although we doubt anybody guessed it would have required killing her to do it). That said, a by-product of this is that some of the show's leads find themselves trapped on the periphery of the action up until the season finale. Everything bodes well for Season Six, though.

Picture: This fifth season of *True Blood* looks every bit as lavish in hi-def as its ancestors. Blacks are intentionally deep and impenetrable, colours are rich and inviting (just check out the interior of the fairy hideout) and fine textures and details are well resolved. As always there are occasional source-related problems (a bit of ringing here, some picture noise there) but they're so brief and infrequent to be of much concern.

Audio: *True Blood* has always managed to give a good account of itself when it comes to its sound design, and this latest season is no exception. The rear speakers are constantly put to engaging use in the DTS-HD Master Audio 5.1 mixes, whether to simply build atmospherics or for more dynamic moments (such as the fairy powers and gunplay in the final episode). Directional effects are convincing, dialogue isn't an afterthought and the bass is surprisingly forceful.







Extras: HBO's latest five-disc set follows the template set down by previous *True Blood* Blu-ray releases. As such, all 12 episodes are accompanied by *Previews*, *Recaps*, *Enhanced Viewing Mode* (on-screen trivia and occasional in-character video '*Confessionals*') and short *Inside Episode...* behind-the-scenes featurettes.

In addition, there are five episode commentaries, a *Maximum Movie Mode*-style picture-in-picture version of episode six (*Autopsy*), a *True Blood Lines* character database and the ability to watch all 12 of the character '*Confessionals*' without having to wade through the *Enhanced Viewing Mode* to find them. Which über-fans may want to do.

HCC Verdict

True Blood: The Complete Fifth Season
→ HBO Home Entertainment
→ All-region BD → £45 Approx
WE SAY: Slick picture and sound make this a treat for BD-based fangbangers

Movie	★★★½☆
Picture	★★★★½
Audio	★★★★½
Extras	★★★½☆
Overall	★★★½☆



Mr. Romero's wild ride revs up on BD

Knights jousting on motorbikes? What more could you possibly want from a cult film?

→ Knightriders



Between *Dawn of the Dead* and *Day of the Dead*, George A. Romero took time out to riff on classic Arthurian legends with this frequently overlooked tale of a renaissance fair troupe of jousting bikers.

Beyond the arresting central conceit of knights on motorbikes, *Knightriders* concerns itself with a tale of personal ideology versus commercialisation – the former represented by troupe leader Billy (Ed Harris), the latter by the skilled fighter Morgan (Tom Savini). What unfolds may be a bit overlong and rather rough around the edges, but it's also an oddly affecting and very likeable film that's ripe for rediscovery.

Picture: Arrow has done a sterling job restoring *Knightriders* for this Blu-ray release. Admittedly, the opening shots leading into the title opticals look worryingly soft, but once you get past this the AVC 1.85:1 1080p image instantly reveals its true colours. And what bold natural colours they are. In addition to the strong colour palette, this HD transfer also showcases some deep stable blacks, good detailing and plenty of native film grain.



Audio: The nature of the source material means that the clash of revving bike engines and PA system commentary in *Knightriders*' LPCM dual-mono mix sounds a little muddy during the petrol-fuelled jousting sequences. Elsewhere, though, it copes fine with the movie's original audio elements and gets the best out of Donald Rubinstein's memorable score.

Extras: Rescued from the long out-of-print Anchor Bay R1 DVD is a relaxed and extremely informative commentary by the filmmakers recorded back in 1999, as well as a theatrical trailer and a pair of TV spots.

Exclusive to this release are a trio of newly recorded interviews with stars Ed Harris (13 minutes), Patricia Tallman (18 minutes) and Tom Savini (12 minutes). All three are worth a watch, with Harris seemingly bemused and amused that the film has taken on cult status, Tallman explaining how her inexperience led to her suggesting dialogue changes, and Savini revealing why he and Doug 'Pinhead' Bradley once found themselves singing songs from *Camelot* at a Red Lobster restaurant...

HCC Verdict

Knightriders
→ Arrow Video → Region B BD/ R2 DVD → £23 Approx

WE SAY: Arrow's regal restoration should help bring Romero's cult flick to a much wider audience on Blu-ray

Movie	★★★★☆
Picture	★★★★☆
Audio	★★★☆☆
Extras	★★★★☆
Overall	★★★★☆

The Servant

StudioCanal → Region B BD
£25 Approx



Joseph Losey's deliciously subversive masterpiece about class relations in '60s Britain has lost none of its impact over the last 40 years – despite the seismic sociological changes the country has undergone since. This wonderful Blu-ray release will hopefully bring the film wider recognition, with the immaculate AVC 1.66:1 1080p visuals (easily one of the best HD encodes in the StudioCanal Collection range) providing a sensational showcase for Losey's inventive direction. The disc also boasts fascinating extras – primarily interviews, both new and archival – including James Fox talking to Richard Ayoade.

★★★★★

Billy Liar: 50th Anniversary Edition

StudioCanal → Region B BD
£23 Approx



Tom Courtenay gives one of the defining performances in British cinema as the titular dreamer in Schlesinger's brilliant 1963 satire. This celebratory hi-def release is a rather more modest success than the film itself, with the monochrome AVC 2.35:1 1080p imagery lacking the sharpness and detailing that you might expect from a high-profile remaster of this type. Also present on the Blu-ray platter is a reasonable batch of extras including various interviews and a look at some early written material by *Billy Liar* author Keith Waterhouse.

★★★½☆

Easter Parade

Warner Home Video → All-region BD
£15 Approx



Not even the combined star power of Fred Astaire (coming back out of retirement after Gene Kelly broke his ankle) and Judy Garland can make *Easter Parade* anything more than a not-entirely-convincing attempt at repackaging a litany of old MGM musical numbers. Not that any of this has stopped Warner Bros. from delivering yet another gorgeous Technicolor restoration for the film's Blu-ray debut. The richly-coloured AVC 1.37:1 1080p encode and DTS-HD MA mono sonics both flatter the source material, and informative extras include a commentary and 1951 radio adaptation.

★★★☆☆

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LED TV

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FT60	42, 47
WT65	47, 55



NEW GT60



NEW FT60

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Panasonic is taking TV to the next level with the new SMART VIERA TV line-up, which offers smart design, smart performance and smart content - such as BBC iPlayer, Facebook, Twitter & YouTube. Available in Plasma and LED; Panasonic VIERA cutting edge technologies bring you more choice when it comes to finding the TV that fits your lifestyle.

SAMSUNG

LED TV

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F8000	40, 46, 55, 65, 75
F8500	46, 55

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Also Available: PIONEER SC-LX76



ONKYO • TX-NR626 • AV RECEIVER
7.2-channel receiver with excellent audio and video performance plus Internet radio and music streaming services.
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YAMAHA • RX-V673 • AV RECEIVER
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Top 10 TELEVISIONS

All prices are approx and may have changed



1 Panasonic TX-P55VT50 → £3,000
★★★★★

Panasonic's plasma TVs continue to impress, and this 55in VT50 model represents the best of its 2012 range – picture strengths include typically cinematic images with exquisite black levels, and the design is simply gorgeous



2 Sony KDL-55HX853 → £1,800 ★★★★★
Sony has returned to form with this 55in LED 3DTV that majors on detail and motion handling, and sports a price that undercuts similar-sized rivals. Buy with confidence



3 Samsung UE55ES8000 → £2,500 ★★★★★
While its Smart features certainly catch the eye – particularly voice and gesture control – this super-slim LED set delivers where it counts, with vibrant HD images that frequently dazzle



4 LG 84LM960V → £22,500 ★★★★★
LG's debut Ultra HD (4K) TV is an eye-opening look at the future of home cinema technology, with upscaled BDs benefitting from the pixel push. Hardly cheap, though



5 Philips 55PFL6007 → £1,700 ★★★★☆
Not one of Philips' top-flight models, but this Passive 3D bigscreen is superb value for money. Imagery is consistently good and the slim-bezel design works wonders with the 55in panel



6 Philips 46PFL9707 → £2,300 ★★★★☆
Philips' second iteration of its Moth Eye screen technology continues to offer astonishing contrast. This set is at its best with 2D HD material, though: crosstalk with 3D is apparent



7 Panasonic TX-L47DT65 → £1,700 ★★★★☆
The first of Panasonic's new 2013 LED TVs impresses with bright, sharp images and Passive 3D. Twin-tuner functionality is a welcome addition to the Smart revolution



8 Toshiba 40RL858 → £500 ★★★★☆
An ideal set for a budget setup – there's no 3D on offer here, or Toshiba's CEVO processing, but the £500 ticket gets you a smart brushed aluminium trim and sharp HD images



9 Samsung UE32EH5000 → £400 ★★★★☆
If you need a 32in TV, this is the model to get – what it lacks in Smart skills it makes for in the AV department. Both HD and SD material impresses and the price ain't bad either



10 LG 50PA650T → £500 ★★★★☆
A 50in plasma TV for just £500 is hard to ignore, and LG's model rewards thrifty buyers with a solid performance. No 3D or Smart capabilities here – just bigscreen HD images and neat styling

Tech Info: Televisions



Plasma or LCD?: The TV market is becoming increasingly dominated by LED-lit LCD screens that are much, much thinner than traditional cold cathode fluorescent lamp (CCFL) screens. For 42in and above, plasma display panels (PDPs) come into play, although LED screens up to 70ins are also hitting the high street – and 84in 4K panels are also on the way. Plasma screens generally offer superior black levels, better viewing angles and less 3D crosstalk, but less brightness and a higher energy consumption. There's also a more limited choice – with just Samsung, LG and Panasonic selling plasma TVs in the UK.



Active or Passive: At the beginning of the 3D revolution, most TVs featured the Active system that uses relatively expensive, powered 3D specs to deliver Full HD images to each eye. Passive 3D TVs, which are increasingly common and now sold by LG, Philips, Toshiba and Panasonic, have a filter over the screen and use non-powered specs with polarising filters. The glasses are cheap as chips, but the resolution of Full HD 3D is halved to 540 lines horizontally (but remains at 1,920 vertically). Glasses-free 3D is in its infancy, with just Toshiba's ZL2 set on sale at present.

Top 5 BLU-RAY MOVIES



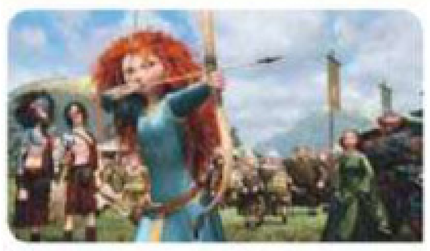
Dracula
This beautifully restored hi-def version of Hammer's 1958 classic finds the garlic-hater looking better than ever – and fang fans finally get to see footage cut by sensors that, until recently, was feared lost for good.
★★★★½



Skyfall
Bond is back on Blu-ray in some style – Daniel Craig's third outing as 007 is an absolute knockout and the hi-def visuals and DTS-HD MA 5.1 audio on Fox/MGM's platter are there to be savoured. Roll on the next one...
★★★★★



Dredd 3D
This no-nonsense comic book actioner gives *Judge Dredd* fans what they always wanted, and the stereoscopic presentation on EiV's Blu-ray is remarkable – don your 3D spex and settle in for the ride!
★★★★☆



Brave
Pixar does its own take on the Disney Princess genre with this beautifully animated and cleverly scripted 'toon. The BD release offers exquisite Full HD imagery and a thunderous 7.1 Dolby TrueHD mix.
★★★★½



Looper
Bruce Willis and Joseph Gordon-Levitt headline this unmissable brain-muddling time-travel flick, which arrives on Blu-ray with a flawless DTS-HD MA 5.1 soundtrack and sharp 1080p visuals.
★★★★★

Storemags.com

Top 10 BLU-RAY PLAYERS

All prices are approx and may have changed



1 Oppo BDP-103EU → £500 ★★★★★

Oppo's first deck for two years has been worth waiting for. The universal BDP-103EU features a class-leading build and all manner of bonus goodies, including twin HDMI inputs should you want to lavish some of its processing power on lesser components. AV performance is faultless, and the onscreen menus are superb. All hail the the new king of Blu!



2 Sony BDP-S790 → £240 ★★★★★

This range-topping deck represents a bargain AV purchase. As well as its 4K upscaling talents, the Sony delivers BDs and DVDs with aplomb, spins SACDs and offers twin HDMI outputs. Classy



3 Oppo BDP-105EU → £1,000 ★★★★★

This heavyweight deck builds on the premium picture performance of the BDP-103EU with a wealth of audiophile upgrades – if you're serious about music, check it out



4 Marantz UD7007 → £1,000 ★★★★★

Marantz's top-line player doesn't bother itself with feature fads like 4K upscaling, preferring to offer faultless BD playback, music streaming (including FLAC) and balanced outputs



5 Pioneer BDP-450 → £230 ★★★★½

Currently the most affordable universal player, the BDP-450 ignores analogue outputs and concentrates solely on the digital age. Well-built and an assured performer



6 Pioneer BDP-LX55 → £350 ★★★★½

An impressively-styled and well-built universal player with a BD performance that's hard to fault and a clean way with CDs. The Smart cupboard is a little bare, though



7 Denon DBT-3313UD → £900 ★★★★☆

As a 'transport' rather than a player, this universal Denon lacks built-in decoders and analogue outputs, but partner it with one of the brand's AVRs via Denon Link HD and you'll be rewarded



8 Panasonic DMP-BDT500 → £300 ★★★★☆

Panasonic's range-topper loves your Blu-ray collection. HD images are sharp and fluid and it doubles as a great Smart hub. The touchpad remote is a bit tricksy, though



9 Sony BDP-S185 → £90 ★★★★☆

A fantastically priced player that mixes a decent AV performance with Sony's content-rich VOD service. Ideal for a budget system or bedroom addition



10 Pioneer BDP-150 → £140 ★★★★☆

Insanely affordable considering its Super Audio CD playback, Pioneer's BDP-150 is a worthy choice if you can live without much in the way of Smart functionality

Tech Info: Blu-ray players

Matching your deck to your AV receiver: Blu-ray decks are designed to deliver top-notch images (some do it much better than others, of course) but Blu-ray is also about enjoying superior quality sound. When choosing a player, bear in mind the connectivity and decoding features of your AV receiver. If you're still using an older model that doesn't offer HDMI inputs, then you'll need a Blu-ray player with multichannel analogue audio outputs to enjoy decoded hi-res surround sound formats. Similarly, older but still HDMI-equipped receivers may not be able to cope with 3D video signals, in which case you'll need a deck with dual HDMI outputs – one channeling audio to your receiver amp, the othe piping video direct to your TV.

What about the PlayStation 3?: Sony's console ushered in the era of Blu-ray playback in 2006 and still represents an easy path to hi-def heaven. For a low-budget home cinema system, the £200 PS3 Slim (160GB) makes a decent choice – especially if you like playing games (in 3D, if you fancy it). Control via a joypad is a pain, though, and the console runs more noisily than most traditional BD spinners.



Demo delight

Prometheus: Ridley Scott's return to the sci-fi genre is a treat for your senses, with a crystal-clear HD image and spine-tingling sonics. The 3D presentation of this outer-space horror is impressive too – it oozes depth and proves utterly immersive



Top 10 PROJECTORS

All prices are approx and may have changed

1



Sony VPL-HW50ES → £3,000

★★★★★

Another compelling example of Sony's rediscovered obsession with quality and a model that no one in the market for a mid-range projector can afford to ignore. Your film collecton is in safe hands here

2



JVC X55 → £5,000 ★★★★★

Armed with a more flexible, second-gen iteration of JVC's e-shift pixel-polishing wizardry, the X55 offers supreme clarity as well as an impressive contrast and near-faultless 3D presentation

3



JVC X35 → £2,900 ★★★★½

The £3,000 price point is the hot spot for home cinema PJs, and JVC's 'entry-level' D-ILA model is definitely worth auditioning – especially if you're not fussed about its '4K' scaling siblings

4



Sony VPL-VW1000ES → £17,000 ★★★★★

Sony's flagship projector is an absolute triumph, giving film fanatics the chance to upscale their Blu-ray collection to 4K resolution. The start of a new era? We hope so!

5



SIM2 Nero 3D-1 → £13,000 ★★★★★

That this isn't SIM2's most expensive model says a lot about the premium projector brand. Yet the DLP-based 3D-1 is still an awe-inspiring beamer, with 3D a particular strength

6



Runco LightStyle LS1 → £4,000 ★★★★½

With a price tag not usually seen on Runco PJs, the LS1 is an excellent choice for those who aren't interested in 3D. This 2D-only DLP model offers brilliant HD pics and ISF certification

7



Epson EH-TW8100 → £2,300 ★★★★☆

Don't want the ISF certification, 3D glasses or wireless HD transmission of the EH-TW9100W (below)? Then save youself £600 and grab this well-priced offering instead

8



Panasonic PT-AT6000E → £2,900 ★★★★☆

Panasonic's newest PJ is undeniably a brilliant performer with 2D, but 3D movies could do with an increase in brightness. Maybe that's why you don't even get any 3D spex bundled in the box...

9



Optoma HD25 → £800 ★★★★☆

Optoma's newest projector provides bright, stable Full HD 3D (with the Active glasses and RF transmitter included) and great-looking 2D visuals for a pittance. But it's a bit noisy

10



BenQ W1070 → £700 ★★★★☆

A brilliant bargain proposition, the BenQ W1070 packs a surprising amount of useful features, including ISF certfication. You'll need to fork out extra for 3D glasses, though

Tech Info: Projectors



Installation: Although projectors can be temporarily placed on a cupboard, stand or shelf situated at the rear of the room (use the adjustable feet on its base to level the image so that it aligns with the screen), a much better long-term solution is to mount it on your ceiling with an appropriate bracket. Projectors can be quite heavy, though, so it's important to ensure that the bracket is attached firmly – ideally, it should be secured to a joist. Position your PJ so that an imaginary line from its lens to the opposite side of the room hits the screen exactly half-way along its width. The location of your screen should therefore dictate where your projector is. A decent tape-measure or laser pointer will help you to determine the position.

Throw distance: Throw distance specifies the distance between the projector and screen for a focused image of given size. As the vast majority of projectors are equipped with a zoom lens, minimum and maximum throw distances are often specified – say, 3.01m to 6.08m for a 100in. 16:9 image. Shorter throw distances are ideal for smaller rooms, and longer ones for larger rooms. Simple.

Throw ratio: Sometimes, a manufacturer will quote a throw ratio rather than a throw distance. This is basically the throw distance divided by the image width. To get the projected image size, divide the distance between projector and screen by the specified figure. Once again, the inclusion of a zoom lens means that upper and lower figures are usually specified.

SONY

Home Cinema Projector Range

HW30 HW50 VW95 VW1000ES



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Top 10 SPEAKERS

All prices are approx and may have changed

1



Wharfedale DX-1 HCP → £400

★★★★★

You can spend a fortune on a 5.1 speaker set, but those on tight budgets aren't ignored. Wharfedale's affordable package looks gorgeous and sounds fantastic, with its tight, fast subwoofer underpinning the satellites with ease

2



Boston Acoustics A Series → £2,200 ★★★★★

Boston Acoustics roped in audio guru Ken Ishiwata from sister brand Marantz to finetune this floorstanding range – the result is a mid-range setup that mixes detail and scale

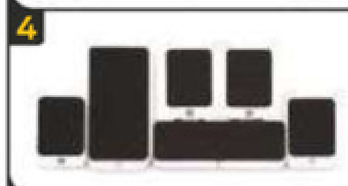
3



Bowers & Wilkins MT-60D → £2,000 ★★★★★

This 5.1 set from B&W sits at the upper end of the sub/sat market, but buyers are rewarded by a potent performance, with the PV1D subwoofer dazzling in particular. They look lovely, too

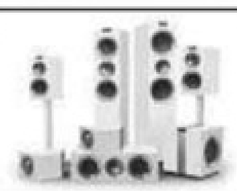
4



Q Acoustics Q2000i → £600 ★★★★★

Another superior sub/sat array from the sonic wizards at Q Acoustics, this marries some surprisingly full-bodied satellite speakers to an easy-to-accommodate 2 x 6in sub

5



KEF R Series → £6,500 ★★★★★

A 7.1 array mixing dipolar and direct radiating surrounds, this package takes its cues from KEF's Blade speaker and offers faultless, largescale, home cinema sonics

6



SVS Ultra 7.1 → £7,150 ★★★★★

A big array (with both bookshelf and dipole designs), this is costly but definitely worth it. Deep, deep bass and soaring high-frequencies coming at you from all angles. Tasty

7



Acoustic Energy 3 Series 5.1 → £2,000 ★★★★★

An easy-to-accommodate system using bookshelfs both front and rear, this brilliantly built array creates a musical, cohesive soundfield backed up by an agile subwoofer

8



Monitor Audio Gold GX → £7,150 ★★★★★

More affordbale than the flagship Platinum range, this 5.1 Gold system still showcases Monitor Audio's strengths – exquisite-looking floorstanders with a rich, intricate, powerful sound

9



KEF T205 → £1,500 ★★★★★

KEF's T Series brings high-quality sonics to your living room with the minimum of intrusion – these thin, flatpanel speakers are far more impressive than you might think

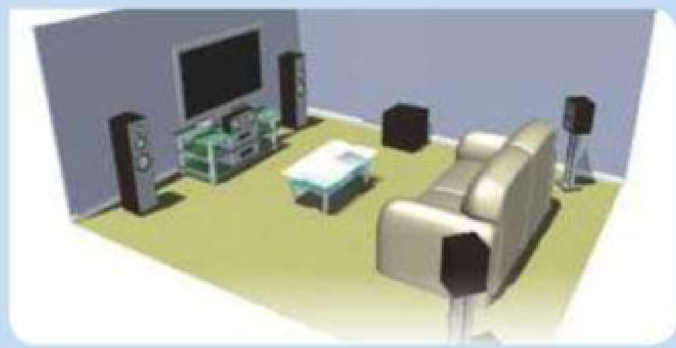
10



Monitor Audio MASS 5.1 → £800 ★★★★★

Five angular satellite speakers joined by a potent (and quite large) 220W subwoofer, MA's MASS 5.1 delivers detailed surround sonics and enough grunt for regular-sized rooms

Tech Info: Speakers



Centre speaker: Handles most of the dialogue and onscreen effects. Should be positioned above or below the screen as close to it as possible. Of course, if you're using a projector screen, it should ideally be placed behind it.

Front speakers: Left and right speakers should be positioned either side of the screen, in line with the centre. Turn the speakers in slightly to face the listener if there isn't an even movement of sound across the front of the room.

Subwoofer: Can be positioned wherever it sounds best or can be tucked out of sight due to the non-directional nature of low-frequency signals. Be aware that close positioning in corners or next to walls can create a boomy effect.

Surrounds: Position alongside the listener, pointing in or slightly behind the ears for a good surround effect. The back wall is not a good position for surrounds – it is, in fact, where you should locate the sixth and seventh speakers (rears) in a traditional 7.1 array.

Demo delight

Gladiator: While it's often the low-end oomph of your sub that impresses friends and family, the high-frequency poise of your speakers is equally important, lending authenticity to the copious Foley effects that litter film soundtracks. The Colosseum fight sequence in *Gladiator*, with its clashing swords, is a perfect test for your tweeters

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Top 10 AV RECEIVERS/AV PROCESSORS/POWER AMPLIFIERS

All prices are approx and may have changed

1 

Denon AVR-4520 → £2,300
★★★★★

Denon's flagship AV receiver sees the brand return to the high-end in style. This 9.2-channel powerhouse mixes subtlety and detailing with brute force and dynamism. Build quality is high and its networking talents impressive

2 

Sony STR-DA5700ES → £2,000 ★★★★★
Sony's STR-DA5700ES is unique among AVRs for offering both built-in Ethernet switching (handy) and video-on-demand (also handy). Flexible, good-looking... and it sounds fabulous

3 

Onkyo TX-NR5010 → £3,000 ★★★★★
The top-of-the-range Onkyo warrants is £3,000 ticket by virtue of massive nine-channel power reserves and an extensive feature list. One for serious setups

4 

Denon AVR-3313 → £1,100 ★★★★★
Sonic detailing is the order of the day here, with the Denon crafting soundstages with considerable finesse. Spotify, Denon Link HD and triple HDMI outputs are the feature highlights

5 

Marantz AV8801 → £2,500 ★★★★★
The brand's high-end 11-channel processor offers balanced outputs and heavyweight engineering. Partner it with the MM8807 power amp for a supreme performance

6 

Pioneer SC-LX86 → £2,000 ★★★★½
As the Japanese corp's top dog, the SC-LX86 is packed with features and built to last. Get to grips with its detailed setup process and you're in for multichannel thrills

7 

Cambridge Audio Azur 751R → £1,600 ★★★★☆
Counting against the Azur 751R is its total lack of networking abilities and old-school interface, but its multichannel and stereo audio performance is hard to beat at this price

8 

Marantz NR1603 → £550 ★★★★☆
The brand's second-gen 'slimline' AVR continues to offer brilliant streaming prowess and enough grunt for its target audience – but the lack of built-in Wi-Fi is annoying

9 

Harman Kardon AVR 370 → £800 ★★★★☆
One of the most sultry-looking models on the market, HK's mid-ranger offers 8-in, 2-out HDMI hookup, AirPlay and a classy audio performance. The app and UI could be better, though

10 

Pioneer SC-2022 → £900 ★★★★☆
Another Pioneer AVR that dazzles with its slick control features and crystal-clear audio presentation. But at this price you'd expect a second HDMI output

Tech Info: AV receivers



Tackling new heights: You may find your AV receiver offering Dolby Pro-Logic IIz, Audyssey DSX or DTS Neo: X post-processing – possibly all three. All of these can deliver two further Front Height channels, with the aim of adding weight and control to the front soundstage, particularly in terms of lifting the centre channel and adding scale to vertical surround effects – rainfall for example. The catch is that you will need to add two new physical speakers, mounted near your ceiling above the regular left and right channel cabinets, and make use of two of the receiver's channels of amplification, which could mean forgoing a second stereo zone or rear surrounds speakers. Note that the Audyssey and DTS modes also cater for Front Wide speakers (picured above), but this idea seems to be gaining less traction within the industry.

How much power?: Many of the mass-market AV receiver manufacturers are involved in a specifications race to see who can say their model is the most powerful, which can be confusing for consumers. For instance, both Krell's £7,000 S-1500 seven-channel power amp and Yamaha's £500 RX-V671 both claim 7 x 150W – the important part is that Krell's figure is into an eight-Ohm load with all channels driven, and that Yamaha's is with one channel into a four-Ohm load, which is hardly a real-world situation. The best advice is ignore the numbers game and get a demo of your desired AVR with the same, or similar, speakers that you intend to partner it with.

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As well as custom built servers and Media PCs, we also offer audio and video players that can be used standalone or in conjunction with our servers and Media PCs. We can also offer at home installations and training.

Top 10 SUBWOOFERS

All prices are approx & may have changed



1 Bowers & Wilkins DB1 → £3,250
★★★★★

Featuring a bipolar arrangement of 12in drivers powered by 1,000W of amplification, B&W's stylish flagship sub is a faultless performer, offering both musicality and sheer muscle. Fit to partner the finest of speakers



2 JL Audio Fathom F212 → £5,900 ★★★★★
The US brand arrives in the UK in style – this 2 x 12in, 3000W brute not only looks gorgeous, it's capable of a mindblowing performance. Got a big room? Get one of these!



3 Tannoy TS2.12 → £550 ★★★★★
The TS2.12 is easily Tannoy's best woofer yet – using a 12in driver (opposite a passive 12in cone) and 500W amp to deliver a rich, warm bass performance. Affordable and good-looking, too



4 Velodyne SPL-800 Ultra → £1,150 ★★★★★
Proof that even 'small' subwoofers can offer a brilliant performance. The 8in driver is helped by a 1,200W amp and mic-assisted room EQ. Tight and fast



5 REL T5 → £450 ★★★★★
The 8in T5 provides a slice of REL engineering at a surprisingly affordable price. Highlights include the simultaneous speaker-level and LFE inputs and pleasing Class A/B sound



6 Bowers & Wilkins PV1D → £1,200 ★★★★★
Possibly the coolest-looking subwoofer on the planet, B&W's revamped PV1 uses its DSP trickery to craft an opulent low-end performance. The touch-sensitive OLED display is pure class



7 Velodyne DD18+ → £5,800 ★★★★★
If you have a large cinema room then this second-gen 18in beast from Velodyne will appeal. The performance is as brilliant as you'd expect for the price and specification



8 REL G1 → £3,300 ★★★★★
A top-of-the range woofer with a price tag to match, buyers of REL's G1 can rest assured they're getting a best-in-breed product. Delivers a warm, rich sound with slam and depth



9 Q Acoustics 2070si → £250 ★★★★☆
A cracking value sub with a smart elongated-oblong design that may make it easier to fit in your room. Each of its 6.5in woofers are driven by a 75W amp



10 Velodyne EQ-Max12 → £800 ★★★★☆
A solid mid-range sub from the bass masters at Velodyne, with a foolproof auto EQ system in addition to a quartet of sound presets. Doesn't exactly ooze design style, though

Tech Info

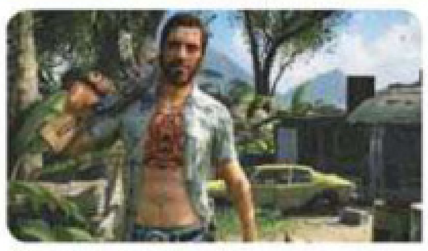


Why use more than one sub?: Using two subwoofers (or perhaps four) should, in theory, bring huge rewards in terms of bass performance. But remember that LFE is a tricky beast to control. Running two subs may simply double problems in your room like room boom and suck-outs, where outgoing and reflected bass sounds cancel each other out. If you have some flexibility in where you place subwoofers, trial and error may well throw up some interesting results. The acoustics wizard Floyd E Toole (his book *Sound Reproduction: The Acoustics and Psychoacoustics of Loudspeakers and Rooms* is fine bedtime reading) suggests one LFE sub to either side of the room may be best for accuracy while placing them in the front corners would be best for overall bass power. Yet there is no hard and fast rule as to what will work best for every room, and you may find that simply using one (large) subwoofer is preferrable as it's the easiest to get sounding right.

Demo delight

Jurassic Park: Steven Spielberg's dinosaur-packed blockbuster is rightly remembered for its cutting-edge CGI, but the surround sound mix is equally impressive. The Blu-ray release provides a perfect test for your subwoofer, with the ominous footfalls of the T-Rex so loud and low in the mix that you should find yourself as terrified as Jeff Goldblum's fast-talking mathematician. If you don't – well, you need a new woofer.

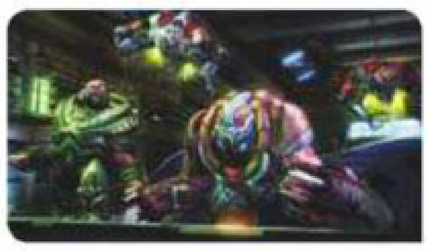
Top 5 HD GAMES



Far Cry 3
An open-world first-person actioner, *Far Cry 3* feels like a breath of fresh air for the genre, with players equally likely to spend time hunting animals as following the kill-the-pirates narrative. Sensational.
★★★★★



Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim
Abandon all hope (of a life), ye who enter here. This third-person action RPG may not be the most visually impressive game around, but it will devour your every waking hour once started. Consider yourself warned...
★★★★★



XCOM: Enemy Unknown
This sequel to the much-loved PC franchise provides a breath of fresh air to console gamers – a turn-based strategy game majoring on brains as well as brawn, drawn with lavish graphics and evocative audio.
★★★★★



Dishonored
This first-person action-adventure puts you in the body of an assassin in a beautifully crafted steampunk world. Convincing characters and great sound design partnered with involving gameplay. We love it.
★★★★★



Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon: Future Soldier
First-rate HD graphics, neat cinematic flourishes and booming audio make this latest entry in the bullets-'n'-brains franchise feel like taking part in *Black Hawk Down*.
★★★★★

Top 10 ACCESSORIES

All prices are approx and may have changed

1



Crystal Acoustics Media Matchbox → £55 ★★★★★

Crystal Acoustics' dinky player will happily play nearly everything you throw at it, including MKV, FLAC and BD/DVD ISO files. Pocket-sized and wallet-friendly, it's an essential purchase for those wanting a fuss-free media player

2



Western Digital WD TV Live Hub → £200 ★★★★★

The WD's built-in 1TB hard drive explains the £200 ticket. This sleek-looking unit incorporates a faultless user interface and smartphone control, making media browsing a breeze

3



Philips Hue → £180 ★★★★½

These Wi-Fi enabled lightbulbs might be a tad expensive (this £180 starter pack includes two, plus the Wi-Fi bridge) but making your own multicoloured lighting scheme is a blast

4



Harman/Kardon BT Air → £350 ★★★★

Comfortable to wear and gorgeous to look at, Harman/Kardon's Bluetooth-capable (hence the BT moniker) headphones offer an enticing, rich performance that isn't overblown in the bass dept

5



One For All Simple 4 → £22 ★★★★

A neatly styled and backlit universal remote control, One For All's budget zapper can tackle up to four devices at once and offers easy setup and handy shortcut keys

6



A.C Ryan PlayOn! HD 2 → £150 ★★★★

This 1TB media player counts USB 3.0 for fast file-copying as one of its USPs. It's solidly built, simple to use and ready to tackle a variety of formats, including DVD/BD ISOs

7



Sony SMP-N200 → £70 ★★★★

A bargain-priced box of tricks from Sony, the SMP-N200 offers built-in Wi-Fi, DLNA networking and access to the Sony Entertainment Network, with control via the XrossMediaBar

8



DVDO Air → £350 ★★★★

Built around the WiDi standard, this wireless HD sender handles Full HD (including 3D) video and multichannel audio. Build quality and design is good, performance hard to fault

9



Digital Stream DPS-1000 → £90 ★★★★

Incorporating BBC iPlayer, YouTube and LOVEFiLM makes this a sound choice for VOD fans, although the lack of built-in Wi-Fi (an optional dongle costs £20) is unfortunate

10



Eminent EM7285 → £165 ★★★★

Pricey, but heavy on features (including Wi-Fi, eSATA port, SD card slot and built-in BitTorrent client), Eminent's style-starved player also offers 'user-generated' apps that are worth a shufti

Tech Info: Media players



What about my TV?: Many flatscreen TVs from the major brands (Sony, Samsung, Panasonic, LG, Toshiba and Sharp) also incorporate media player functionality, using Ethernet or Wi-Fi to stream from your home network, or from plugged-in USB drives. Most modern Blu-ray players offer this, too. However, file support is rarely as extensive as on dedicated devices from the likes of Western Digital and A.C. Ryan, and our experience shows some are more adept at playback from USB than over a network. Nor (obviously) is a TV or BD player portable. If your media collection extends beyond JPEGs and MP3s into lossless audio rips and esoteric HD video formats, then a standalone player is a good investment.

Storage: You can, if you really want, store all your files on a plethora of USB drives, or on your PC, but it's best to get a NAS (Network Attached Storage) device for simplified sharing of your media across a network with multiple players, such as one from Netgear's ReadyNAS range (pictured). These dedicated devices often offer RAID array file backup, and are managed via browser software. Storage capacity can be anything from 1TB to 12TB and beyond.



Top 5 BLU-RAY BOX SETS



Game of Thrones: The Complete Second Season

Another ten episodes of prime fantasy TV gets a spectacular Blu-ray release courtesy of HBO Home Entertainment – the picture and sound quality consistently impresses.

★★★★★



Indiana Jones: The Complete Adventures

Although the *Raiders of the Lost Ark* restoration isn't the best we've seen, this is a box set that no home cinema fan can afford to be without. And ...*Temple of Doom* is uncut, too!

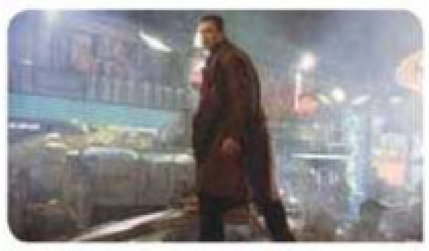
★★★★½



Universal Classic Monsters: The Essential Collection

Bag yourself eight great monster movies given a thorough cleanup by Universal Studios – and marvel at the sheer brilliance of *The Creature from the Black Lagoon* in 3D.

★★★★½



Blade Runner: 30th Anniversary Ultimate Collector's Edition

Which cut of Ridley Scott's sci-fi classic do you prefer? Actually, it doesn't matter – this set boasts all five versions of the film in HD, plus a plethora of bonus goodies.

★★★★½



The Lord of the Rings Trilogy: Extended Edition

Peter Jackson's box office-breaking trilogy simply dazzles in HD, and these extended cuts are perfect for Middle Earth maniacs. Watch the movies then savour the 26 hours of extras.

★★★★★

MASS

Delivering the explosive charge of the latest hi-def movie soundtracks is Monitor Audio's diminutive MASS home cinema system, packed with technology for jaw-dropping audio dynamics and décor-friendly styling.



WHAT HI-FI? SOUND AND VISION AWARDS 2012

SPEAKER PACKAGES

BEST STYLE PACKAGE £600-£1000

MONITOR AUDIO MASS

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Growing numbers of professional home cinema installers in the UK are turning to Starscape for fibre optic and LED solutions, not to mention our professional customers in Belgium, Switzerland, Portugal, South Africa, the Czech Republic and South Africa.

Photo: Artcoustic SA and Sphere Custom Design

However, we're also proud of the friendly, no-jargon service that we offer DIY home cinema enthusiasts. Our fibre optic and LED lighting can add that finishing touch to your room, and you'll find it surprisingly affordable, and easy to install. Creative use of lighting can make all the difference between just a room with a large TV/projector and a truly distinctive and personal space.



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Top 5 PVRs



Virgin Media TiVo, £subscription
This triple-tuner PVR offers ultimate recording flexibility, useful features – you can undelete deleted shows! – and awesome TiVo functionality. A no brainer if you're in a cable area

★★★★★



Sky+HD, £subscription
Sky's channel choice is second-to-none and its twin tuner 2TB PVR is a perfect partner. The recent EPG tweak is welcome and Anytime (the push VOD service) is brilliant for catching up on new movies

★★★★★



Panasonic DMR-HW220, £250
Panasonic's PVR mixes a 1TB hard drive with its Smart Viera functionality and media streaming – so at £250 it's an absolute steal, regardless of the uninspired design

★★★★★



Pure Avalon 300R Connect, 1TB, £350
Pure's debut Freeview+ HD offering is assured. While it can't match YouView for VOD content, the user interface here is unrivalled and four-way HDMI switching a welcome addition

★★★★½



Humax DTR-T1000, £300
The first ever YouView product was worth the lengthy wait – this is a fine example of how to integrate broadcast telly and IPTV. We can't wait for a larger 1TB version, with built-in Wi-Fi, to surface

★★★★☆

Top 5 SOUNDBARS



Yamaha YSP-2200, £800
Launched back in 2011, but still part of the Yamaha lineup, this premium-priced 'Digital Sound Projector' offers very effective virtual surround, a separate 100W subwoofer and 3-in, 1-out HDMI switching

★★★★☆



Boston Acoustics TVee M30, £450
Build quality is the order of the day here – Boston's 'bar/sub combi (designed for screens 40in and up) is beautifully designed and constructed. The wireless sub simplifies installation

★★★★☆



Orbitsound T12v3, £300
Another great-sounding 'bar from Orbitsound – this third-gen model features an improved subwoofer and internal components. 'Spatial stereo' processing widens your flatpanel's sound considerably

★★★★☆



Samsung HW-E450, £250
HDMI connectivity, wireless subwoofer hookup, Bluetooth streaming and USB file playback help this well-priced 'bar stand out from the crowd. Audio performance is solid, too – but lossless tracks aren't catered for

★★★★☆



Roth Audio Sub Zero, £150
This well-constructed soundbar eschews a dedicated sub (hence the name) in favour of a brace of 'ultra bass' drivers alongside six other speakers. Sound quality is expansive, with a tight low-end and impressive volume

★★★★☆

Top 5 SYSTEMS



Panasonic SC-BTT590, £630
The use of new bamboo/charcoal drivers and noise-shaping tech pays dividends here, with a classy sound quality to match the wealth of features (3D BD, Smart TV and more)

★★★★☆



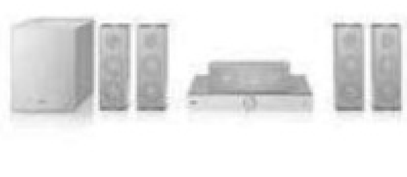
Samsung HT-E6750W, £1,000
Samsung's pricey tallboy system uses a vacuum tube pre-amp to sweeten up its sound and offers virtual 7.1 from its five speakers courtesy of vertical-firing drivers. The feature count is extensive

★★★★☆



Harman Kardon BDS470, £650
Harman's 2.1 system eschews 'net TV and streaming features but majors in heavyweight build quality and solid AV performance. We tested a 2.1 iteration – 5.1 is also available

★★★★☆



LG BH8220B, £650
With its silver finish, this is a suitable one-box system to partner with LG's flatscreen TVs, with a commendable, if slightly lacking in HF finesse, sound. Additional features including CD-ripping to USB. Handy

★★★★☆



Panasonic SC-HTB570, £350
A commendable slim-line 2.1 system that can also be clicked together to make a soundbar. The punchy wireless subwoofer does a lot of the work. Bluetooth music streaming is onboard

★★★★☆

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File fanatics: How to improve your home network setup
What the hell is Redray? An Ultra HD media player, that's what...
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→ On test

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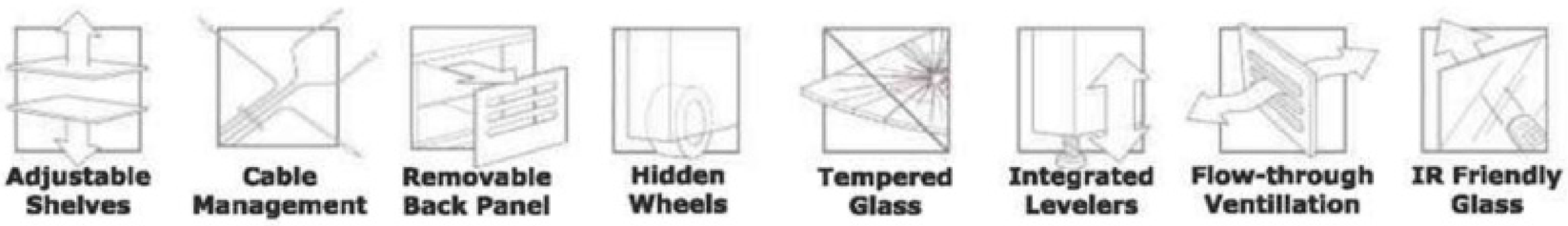
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Point of View

Setting up one subwoofer is hard. Setting up two involves the kind of patient, logical thinking that **Richard Stevenson** just isn't cut out for

I HAVE YET another subwoofer-induced headache, and it's not from playing the opening sequence to *The Expendables 2*. Rather, it's from trying to get my noodle around a mind-bogglingly complex setup. You see, my period of single subwoofer purity has come to an end, with a second Velodyne DD18+ joining my system to capitalise on the new breed of 11.2-channel AV hardware.

Positioning the beast was not challenging, mentally at least. There was a suitable space to the right of the centre speaker mirroring the other DD18+ to the left. Yes, one should experiment with subwoofer placement for best sound but it's a small room and life's too short. Moreover, the Velodyne weighs more than 50kg, comes in a box that could double as a garden shed and had to be slipped into the house before my wife could complain.

Method in the madness

The real challenge began at setup. The DD18+ comes with a mic and PC-based EQ software to tailor performance. It offers three methods of tweakery, from generating and measuring its own sweep tones and applying basic parametric EQ, to fully manual setup using a sweep tone generated by a CD in your BD player. The latter method measures your main speaker's LF response at the same time to ensure the output of the sub is adjusted to give the flattest response of the overall AV system, not just the woofer on its own.

Yet the LFE feed may also contain main channel information, depending on the size of your speakers and crossover settings. It may be subject to EQ by your AVR, and may well be doubling up LF output if the AVR sub output is set to LFE+Main. If you have a system whereby the sub is also connected to the main power amplifiers at speaker level, to add low-frequency in-fill for stereo music, then things start to get really complex. Working this out for two subs gets into *University Challenge* territory. Should you EQ both subs together and apply an identical EQ map using Velodyne's master and slave setup, or EQ each sub individually? The latter method would not take into consideration room interactions of the other woofer but would theoretically be more accurate for two-channel music, where left and right signals could be radically different.

After that you have six pre-sets that can be given unique EQ maps, each with eight filters that are all adjustable for frequency, gain and bandwidth. On top of that you have about a dozen user-adjustable parameters, from the frequency and slope of the lowpass filter to the degree Velodyne's digital servo system is used to control the cone movement. Just to make it really tricky, the user manuals are awful.

So it's been a learning curve – with really steep bits – and I'm still not convinced I have achieved the ideal setup, despite trying countless methods. Best so far has been achieved by running simultaneous setup with a laptop connected to each Velodyne. A third laptop is used to log all the results for comparison, making the whole process look a bit mad scientist with a hint of nerd.

Still, many lessons have been learned, the key one being, 'wear ear defenders' – I pressed play on the 10Hz-200Hz sweep CD without checking the volume was turned down and the 15-second blast of sonic devastation was epic. Hitting stop was followed by stunned silence, then an irate voice shouting from the smallest room upstairs: 'For God's sake Richard, I thought the toilet was exploding!' My new subwoofer purchase had been rumbled ■

Have you fine-tuned your subwoofer's output? Let us know: email letters@homecinemachoice.com



Richard Stevenson has realised that having three laptops is all well and good – but he really needs to have six legs to make it work

Screenings

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